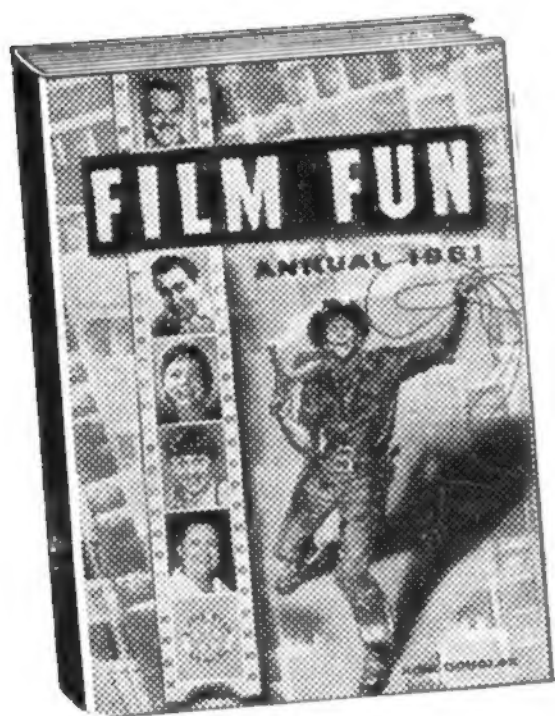




ENEMY ENGAGED



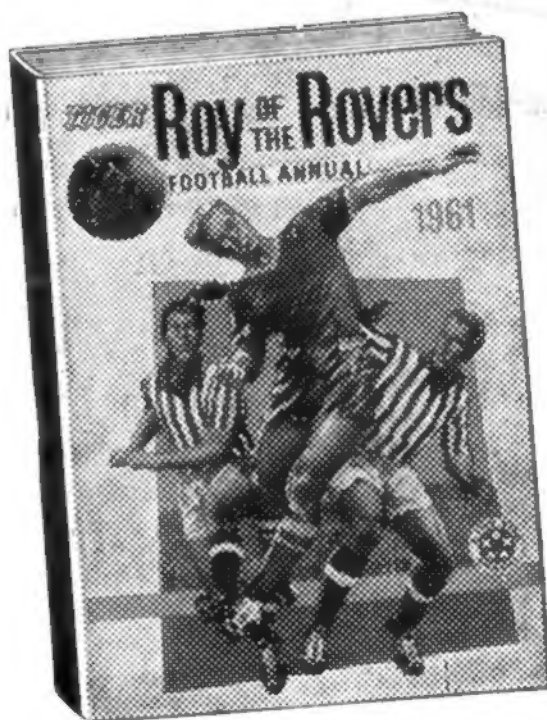
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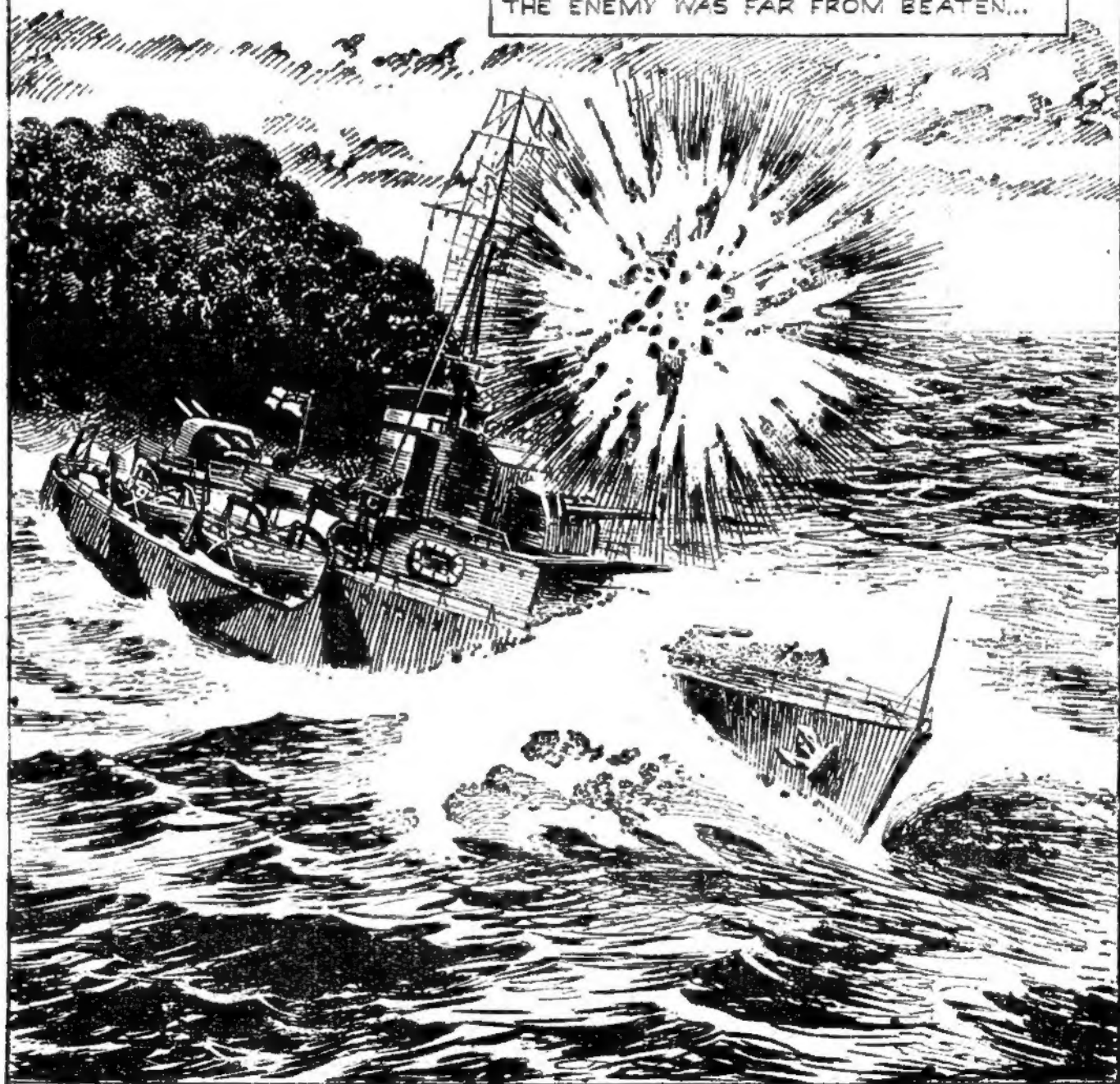
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ENEMY ENGAGED

BY SPRING 1944, THE BRITISH FAR EASTERN FLEET WAS MOVING SLOWLY OVER TO THE OFFENSIVE. FROM THEIR BASE AT TRINCOMALEE IN CEYLON, ROYAL NAVAL SHIPS AND AIRCRAFT MADE DARING FORAYS ACROSS THE JAP-INFESTED INDIAN OCEAN. BUT THE ENEMY WAS FAR FROM BEATEN...



Chapter 1. The TEST of COMMAND

TASK FORCE 84, RETURNING FROM A STRIKE AT THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS, HAD RUN INTO A SUPERIOR JAPANESE FLEET. A SINGLE SMALL BRITISH SHIP HAD FLUNG ITSELF FORWARD TO PUT DOWN A SMOKE SCREEN BETWEEN THE DAMAGED FORCE AND THE VENGEFUL ENEMY.



THAT SHIP WAS A DESTROYER, AND HER NAME WAS H.M.S. THORN. ALREADY A SIX-INCH SHELL HAD SAVAGELY SWEEPED HER BRIDGE WITH SHRAPNEL AND CUT DOWN HER CAPTAIN, BUT STILL SHE KEPT HER COURSE AND HER BRAVE PURPOSE.



AS THE BLACK SCREEN OF SMOKE HID THEIR CRIPPLED QUARRY FROM THEM, THE ANGRY GUNS OF THE JAPANESE CRUISERS TURNED ON THE DESTROYER. BUT IT WAS NOT ONLY A SHIP WHICH WAS DEFEYING THEM, BUT A STRICKEN CAPTAIN AND A COOL FIRST LIEUTENANT.

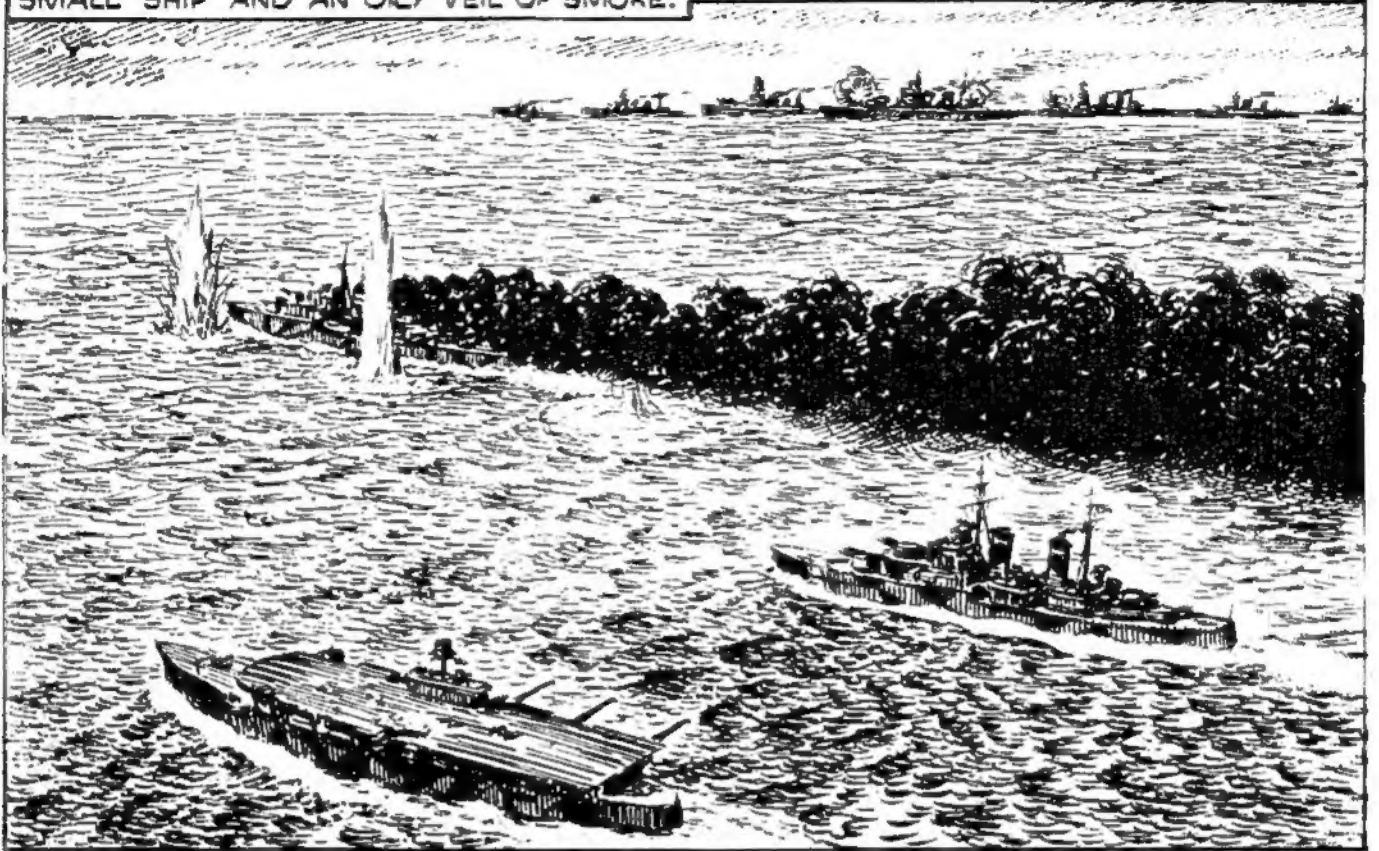


A TEN DEGREE TURN LAY THE *THORN* OVER ON HER SLIM BEAM AS THE ENEMY GUNS FLASHED. BY TEN DEGREES A SHELL MISSED HER DECK, AND STILL THE THICK SMOKE STREAMED OUT ASTERN TO CONFUSE THE ENEMY.



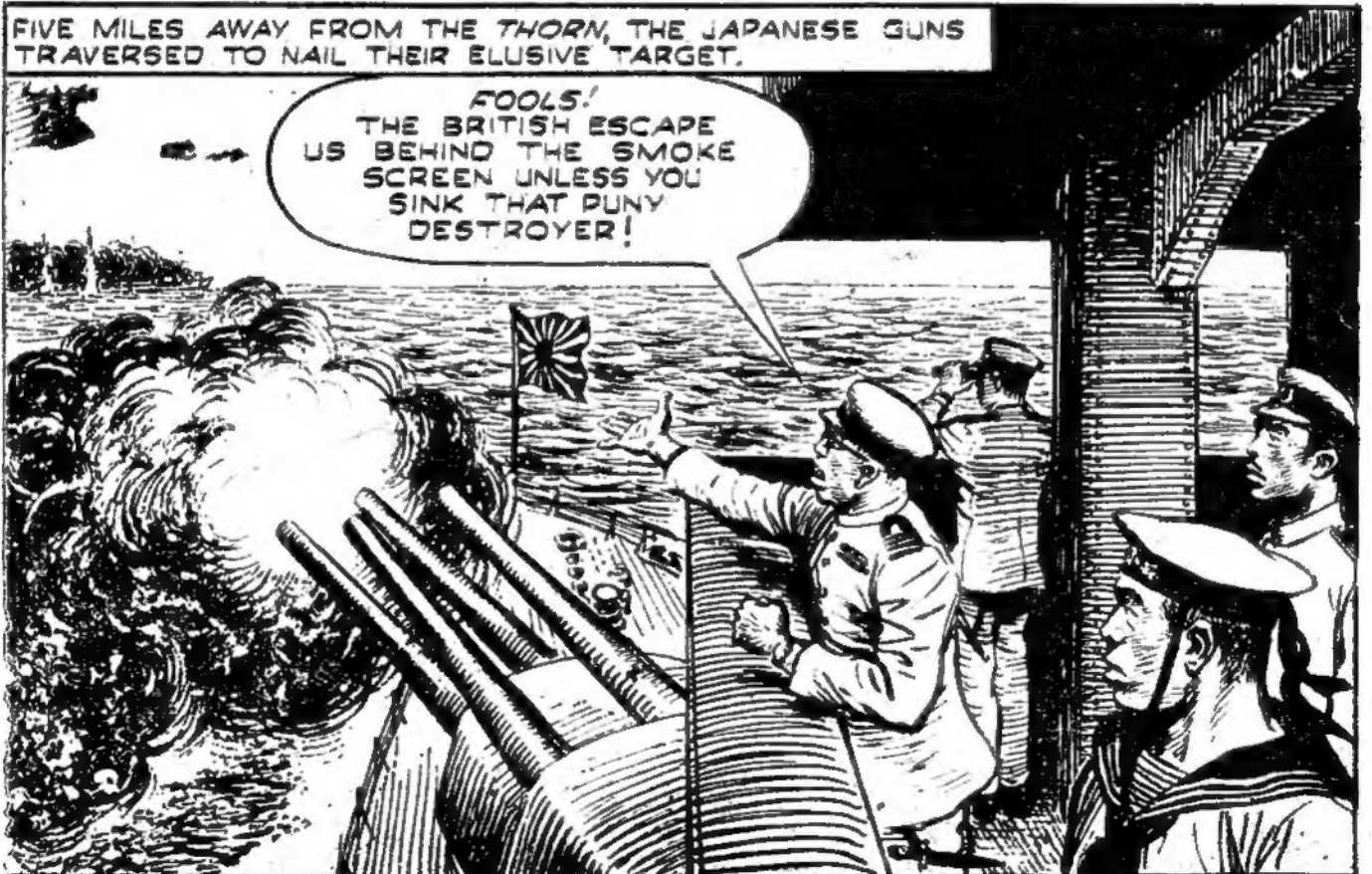
Enemy Engaged

MAULED IN THE RECENT ATTACK ON THE JAPANESE SHORE POSITIONS IN THE ANDAMANS, THE BRITISH ESCORT CARRIER COULD NOT FLY OFF ITS AIRCRAFT TO STRIKE BACK. ALL THAT STOOD BETWEEN HER AND ANNIHILATION WAS ONE SMALL SHIP AND AN OILY VEIL OF SMOKE.

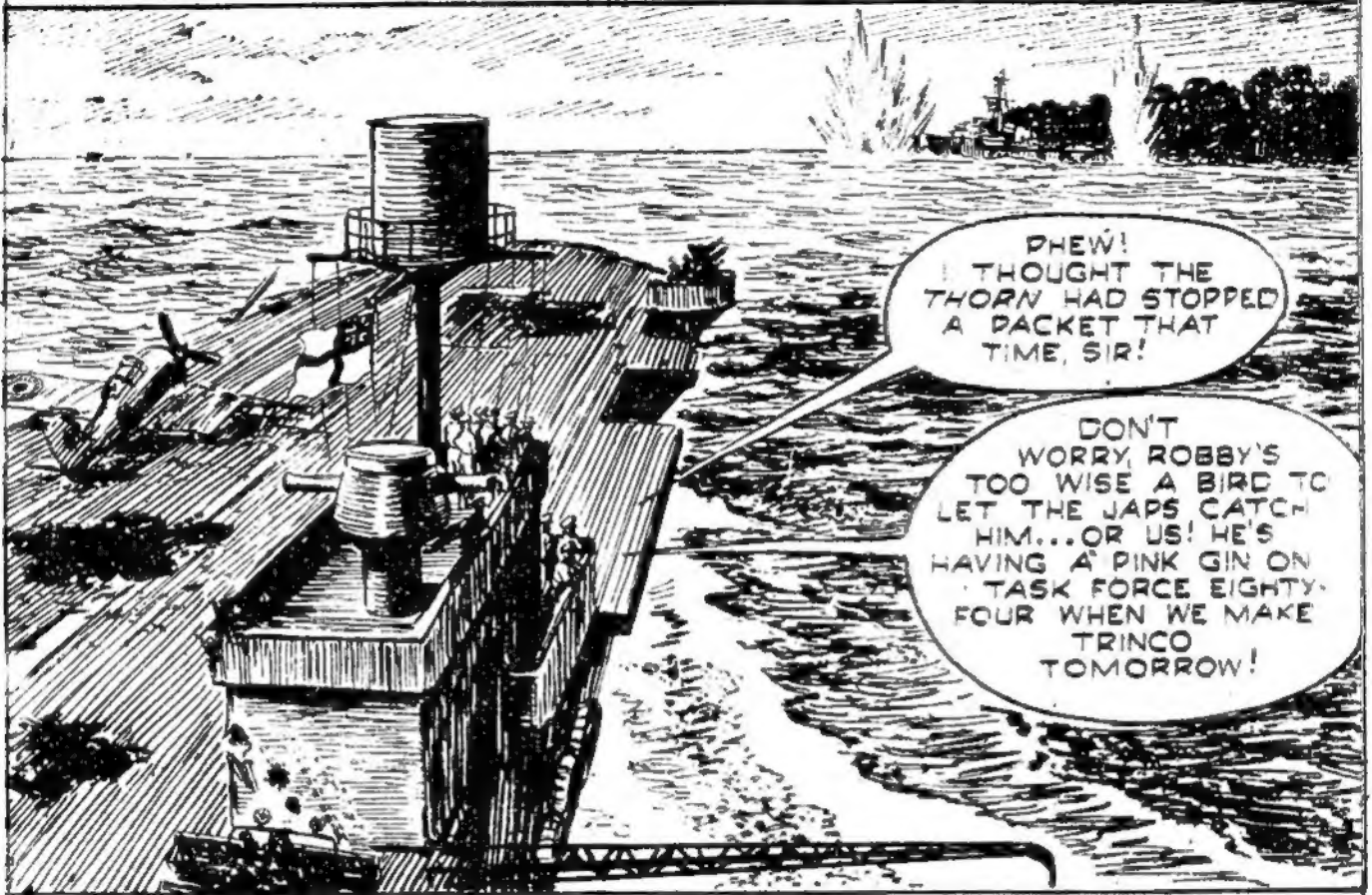


FIVE MILES AWAY FROM THE *THORN*, THE JAPANESE GUNS TRAVERSED TO NAIL THEIR ELUSIVE TARGET.

FOOLS!
THE BRITISH ESCAPE
US BEHIND THE SMOKE
SCREEN UNLESS YOU
SINK THAT PUNY
DESTROYER!



ANGER AND HASTE WERE SPOILING THE JAPANESE AIM. AND ON THE BRITISH CARRIER, ALREADY TURNING NORTH TO SLIP AWAY FROM THE ENEMY...



PHEW!
I THOUGHT THE
THORN HAD STOPPED
A PACKET THAT
TIME, SIR!

DON'T
WORRY, ROBBY'S
TOO WISE A BIRD TO
LET THE JAPS CATCH
HIM...OR US! HE'S
HAVING A PINK GIN ON
TASK FORCE EIGHTY-
FOUR WHEN WE MAKE
TRINCO
TOMORROW!

BUT LIEUTENANT COMMANDER ROBBINS R.N., CAPTAIN OF H.M.S. THORN, WOULD DRINK NO MORE PINK GINS IN TRINCOMALEE...



WE'VE GOT TO
GET YOU BELOW,
SIR!

NO... LEAVE
ME ALONE NOW!
I HAVEN'T GOT
MUCH TIME LEFT,
BUT I'LL SPEND
IT IN GOD'S GOOD
AIR! NUMBER
ONE, COME
HERE!

THE VOICE OF THE DYING MAN WAS FAINT, BUT THE WORDS WOULD ECHO THROUGH THE REST OF LIEUTENANT MICHAEL GRAHAM'S SERVICE LIFE.

WHEN YOU'RE CAPTAIN OF THE THORN, NUMBER ONE, REMEMBER WHAT I'M GOING TO SAY! A SHIP AND ITS MEN WILL BE IN YOUR HANDS! SERVE THEM WELL!



BUT,
SIR...

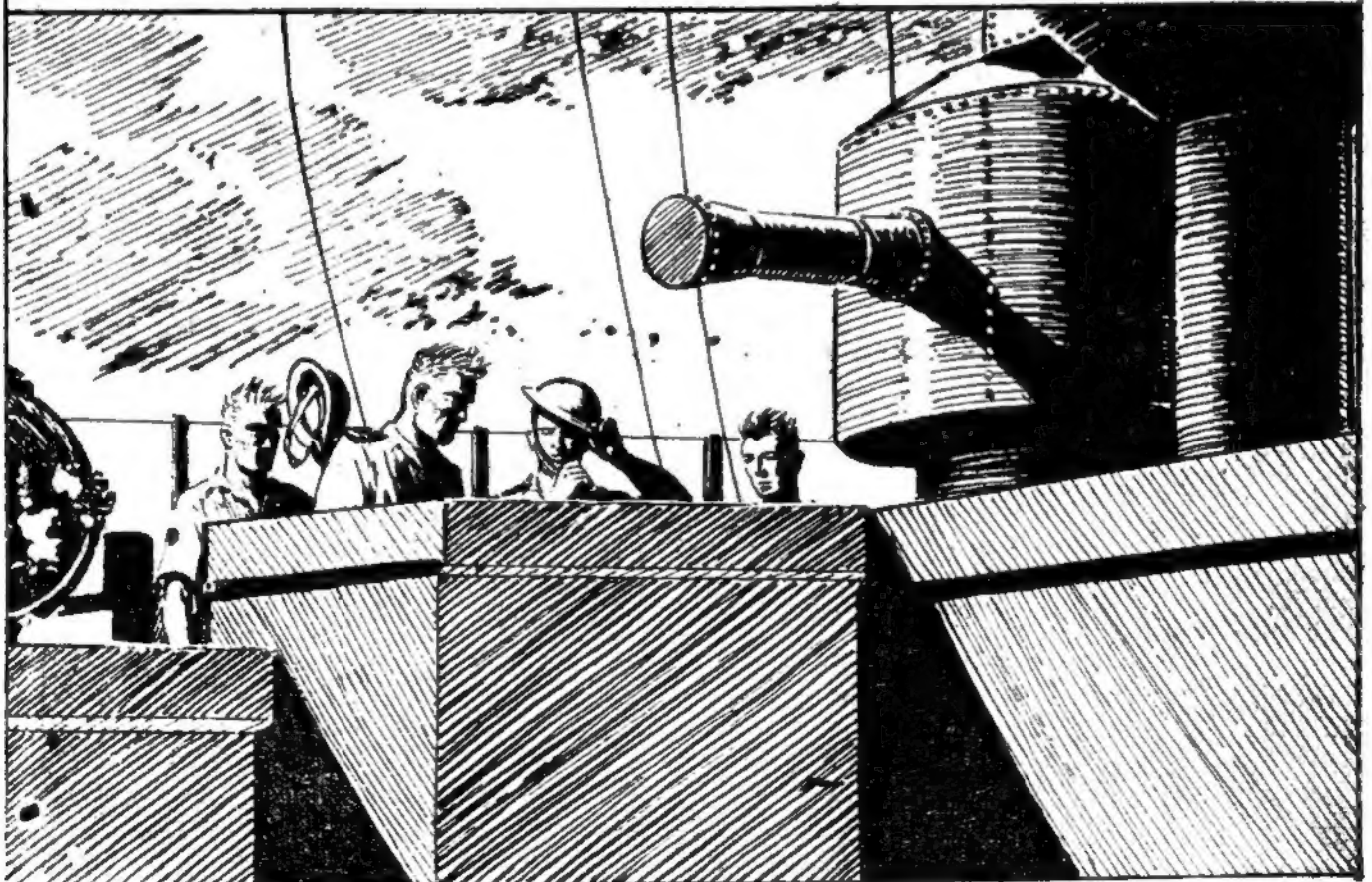
Enemy Engaged

ONE DAY, AND SOON ENOUGH, THE FIRST LIEUTENANT OF THE *THORN* WOULD RECOGNISE THE TRUTH OF THOSE WORDS.

COMMAND OF A SHIP MAKES A MAN...OR BREAKS HIM, MIKE... I THINK YOU'VE GOT THE RIGHT STUFF IN YOU, BUT WHETHER YOU HAVE OR NOT, YOUR SHIP WILL FIND OUT...YOUR SHIP...



THE VOICE FADED INTO SILENCE. GRIMLY, LIEUTENANT MICHAEL GRAHAM STOOD UP AND PULLED HIS CAP FROM HIS HEAD. THE SALUTE A FIGHTING MAN MAKES TO THE DEAD IS BRIEF BUT IT IS SINCERE.



Enemy Engaged

7

AS THE OFFICERS AND MEN OF THE THORN PAID THEIR LAST RESPECTS TO THEIR SKIPPER, A FAINT NOISE THROBBED AND GREW IN THE SERENE SKY...



FROM TRINCOMALEE A HUNDRED MILES AWAY, THREE SQUADRONS OF AVENGER BOMBERS SWEEP IN TO THE ATTACK. VULNERABLE SO FAR FROM ITS BASE, THE JAPANESE FLEET TURNED AND RAN. AND AS THE THORN REJOINED THE TASK FORCE.

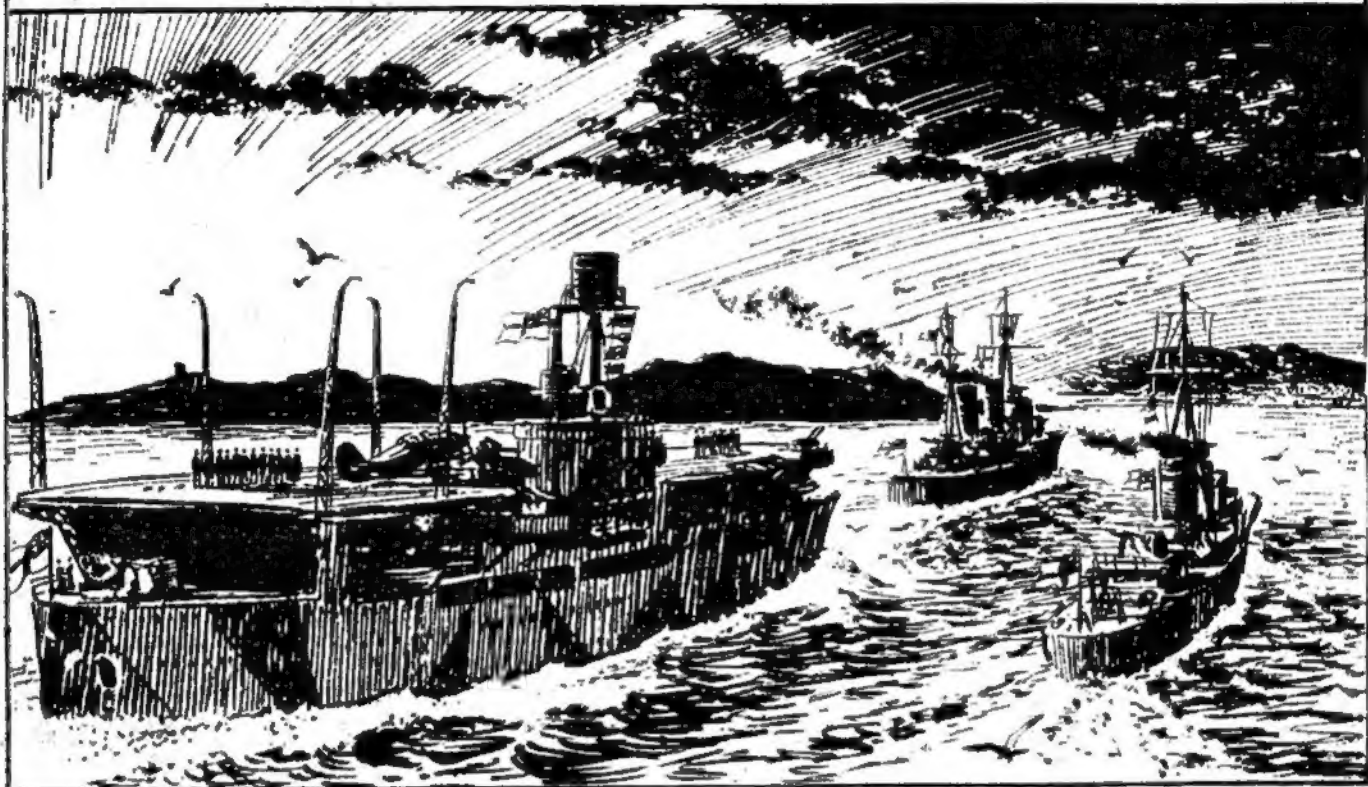


BRIEFLY OVER THE LOUD Hailer, THE ACTING CAPTAIN OF THE THORN PASSED ON THE BITTER NEWS. AND AS THE DESTROYER TOOK UP ITS STATION ON THE FLANK OF THE TASK FORCE IT HAD SAVED, YOUNG MICHAEL GRAHAM MADE A HEARTFELT RESOLVE.



Enemy Engaged

AT SUNSET THAT DAY, TASK FORCE 84 PAUSED IN MID-OCEAN. WITH SIMPLE CEREMONY, THE CAPTAIN OF THE *THORN* WAS COMMITTED TO THOSE DEEP WATERS HE HAD SAILED SO BRAVELY. AND AT DAWN...



WHEN HE HAD SAFELY BERTHED THE *THORN* IN THE INNER HARBOUR OF TRINCOMALEE, LIEUTENANT MICHAEL GRAHAM DONNED HIS NUMBER ONE UNIFORM. HE HAD A CALL TO PAY...



Enemy Engaged

9

REAR-ADMIRAL BLAZEY AT H.Q., FAR EASTERN FLEET, HAD ALREADY EXPRESSED A WISH TO SPEAK TO THE FIRST LIEUTENANT OF THE THORN. HIS ARRIVAL WAS ANNOUNCED...

LIEUTENANT GRAHAM IS HERE, SIR TO SEE THE ADMIRAL!

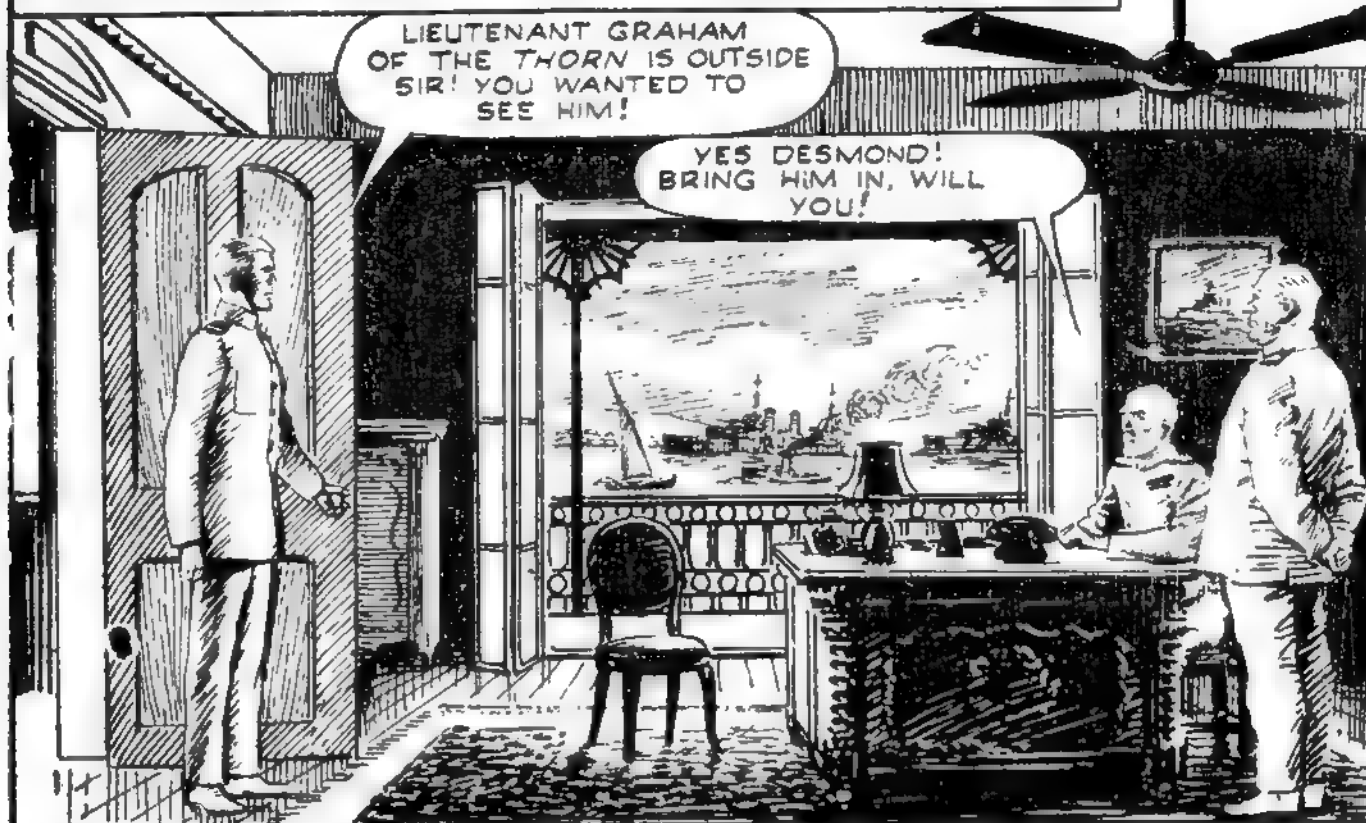
ALL RIGHT, HILARY! I'LL SEE IF THE OLD MAN'S FREE!

IN THE ADMIRAL'S OUTER OFFICE SAT A MAN WITH A HANDSOME FACE, A CRISP VOICE, AND THREE GOLD RINGS ON HIS EPAULETTES. HE WAS A COMMANDER R.N., AND HIS NAME WAS DESMOND HICHENS.

GRAHAM, EH? HE'S COME SOONER THAN I EXPECTED!

Enemy Engaged

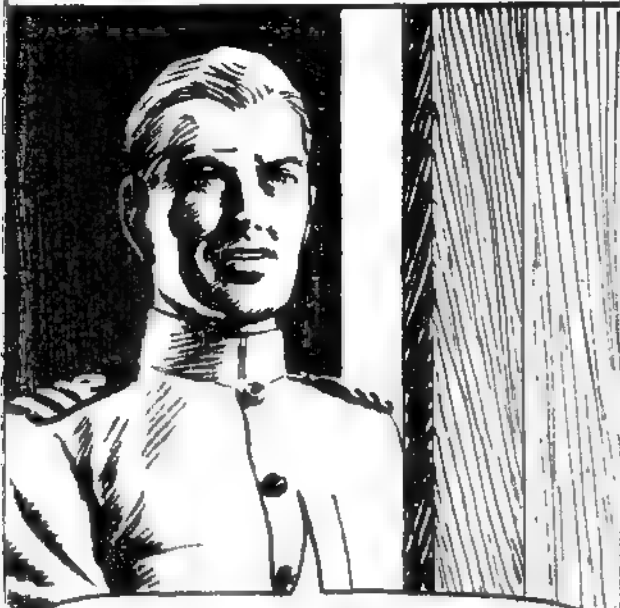
THE QUICK ARRIVAL OF THE THORN'S FIRST LIEUTENANT SEEMED TO HAVE CAUGHT COMMANDER HICKENS BY SURPRISE... AND HE WAS A MAN WHO SELDOM ALLOWED THINGS TO SURPRISE HIM.



AS HE TURNED TO THE DOOR, DESMOND HICKENS PAUSED AND SMILED. IT WAS A WRY LITTLE SMILE...



THE YOUNG COMMANDER WAS ON FAMILIAR TERMS WITH THE ADMIRAL. HIS VOICE WAS SMOOTH AND EASY.



GRAHAM WILL GET COMMAND OF THE THORN, SIR! A SHIP OF HIS OWN! A CHANCE TO FIGHT! THEY CAN BE PRETTY DESIRABLE THINGS TO A STAFF OFFICER, YOU KNOW!

REAR-ADMIRAL BLAZEY WAS CONCERNED...

I MAY BE A BIT ANCIENT, DESMOND, BUT I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL! ON THE OTHER HAND, YOU'RE DOING A FINE JOB ON MY STAFF! EVERYONE ON THE STATION RESPECTS YOU! NO ONE THINKS ANY THE LESS OF YOU FOR NOT BEING IN THE FIRING LINE!

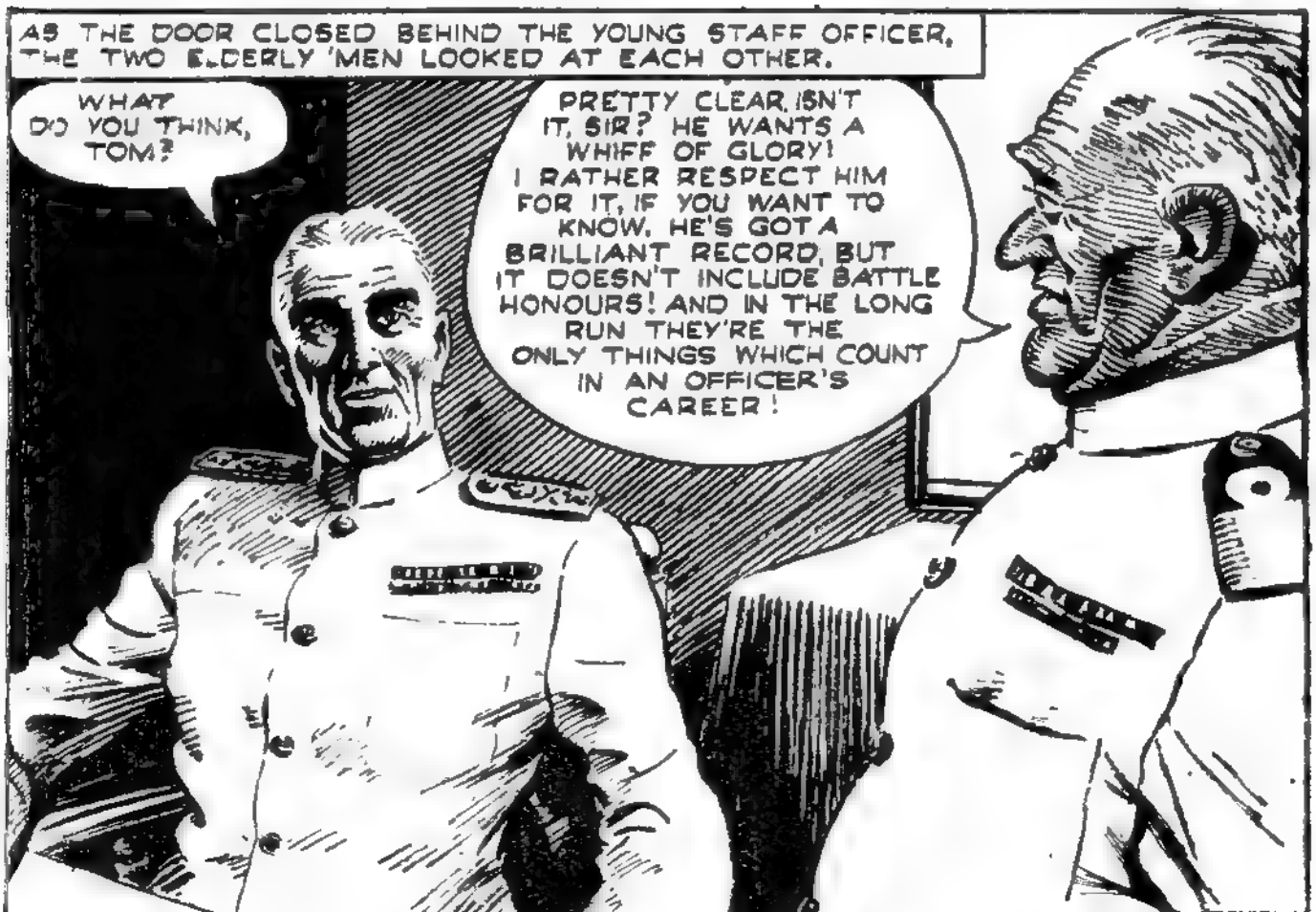


PERHAPS NOT, SIR, BUT THERE IT IS! I WISH I WAS IN YOUNG GRAHAM'S SHOES!

AS THE DOOR CLOSED BEHIND THE YOUNG STAFF OFFICER, THE TWO ELDERLY MEN LOOKED AT EACH OTHER.

WHAT DO YOU THINK, TOM?

PRETTY CLEAR, ISN'T IT, SIR? HE WANTS A WHIFF OF GLORY! I RATHER RESPECT HIM FOR IT, IF YOU WANT TO KNOW. HE'S GOT A BRILLIANT RECORD, BUT IT DOESN'T INCLUDE BATTLE HONOURS! AND IN THE LONG RUN THEY'RE THE ONLY THINGS WHICH COUNT IN AN OFFICER'S CAREER!

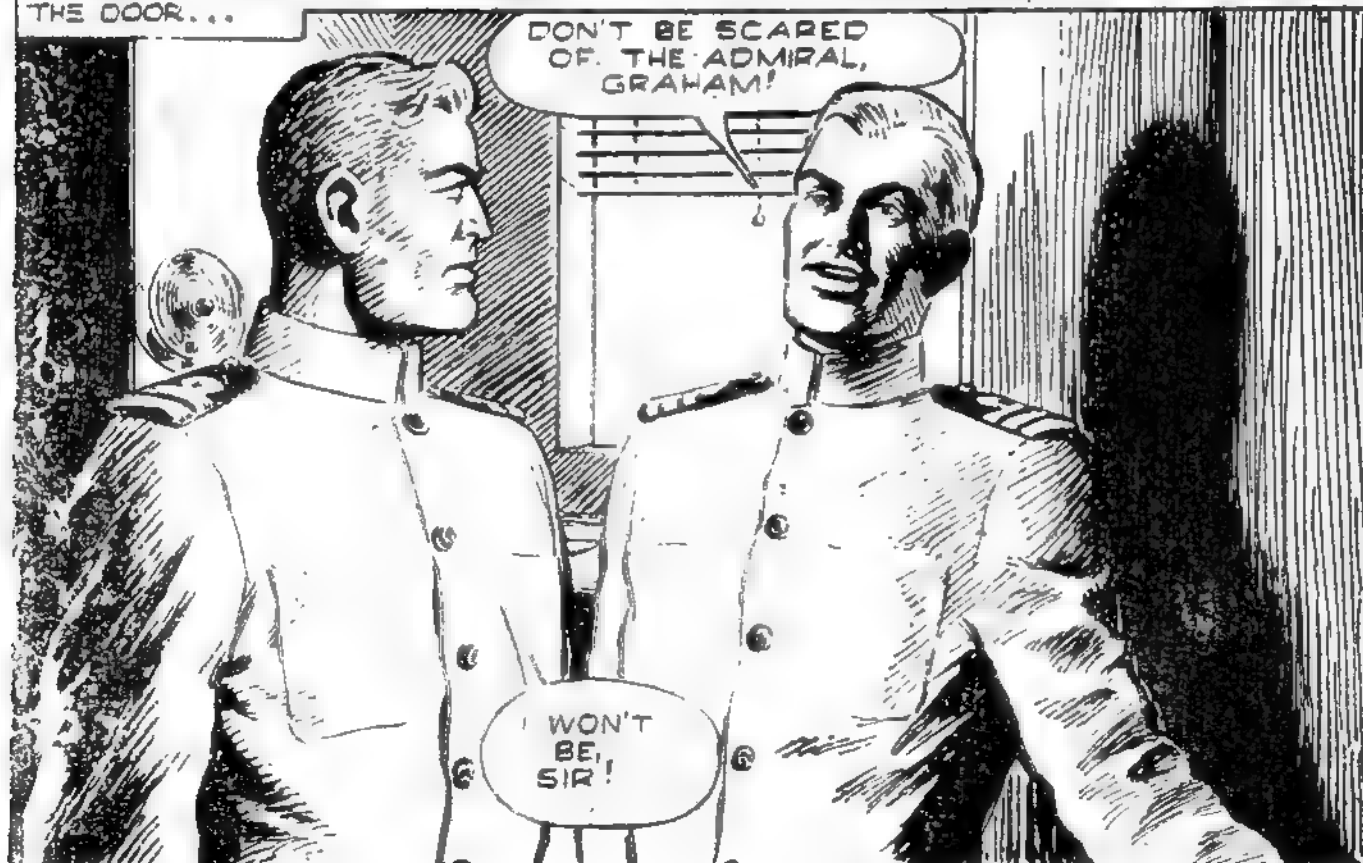


Enemy Engaged

THE YOUNG OFFICER'S WORDS HAD HAD THEIR EFFECT ON THE ADMIRAL.



IN THE OUTER OFFICE, COMMANDER HICHENS LED THE FIRST LIEUTENANT OF THE THORN TO THE ADMIRAL. HE SMILED ENCOURAGINGLY AS HE OPENED THE DOOR...



MICHAEL GRAHAM HARDLY NOTICED THE HANDSOME COMMANDER AS HE WENT IN. NOW HIS MIND WAS FILLED WITH FIERY MEMORIES...



REAR-ADMIRAL BLAZEY LOOKED DOUBTFULLY AT THE STOLID-FACED YOUNG LIEUTENANT BEFORE HIM. WOULD HE MAKE A WORTHY CAPTAIN OF THE THORN, AS WORTHY AS SAY COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS?



Enemy Engaged

THE YOUNG COMMANDER HEARD THE ADMIRAL'S PARTING WORDS TO GRAHAM WITH AN EXPRESSIONLESS FACE. BUT AS THE DOOR CLOSED HE GAVE THE FIRST LIEUTENANT A WARM SMILE.



THAT SMILE, SO WARM AND SINCERE, PUZZLED THE UNDEMONSTRATIVE MIKE. THOUGHTFULLY, HE PAUSED IN THE SECRETARY'S OFFICE...

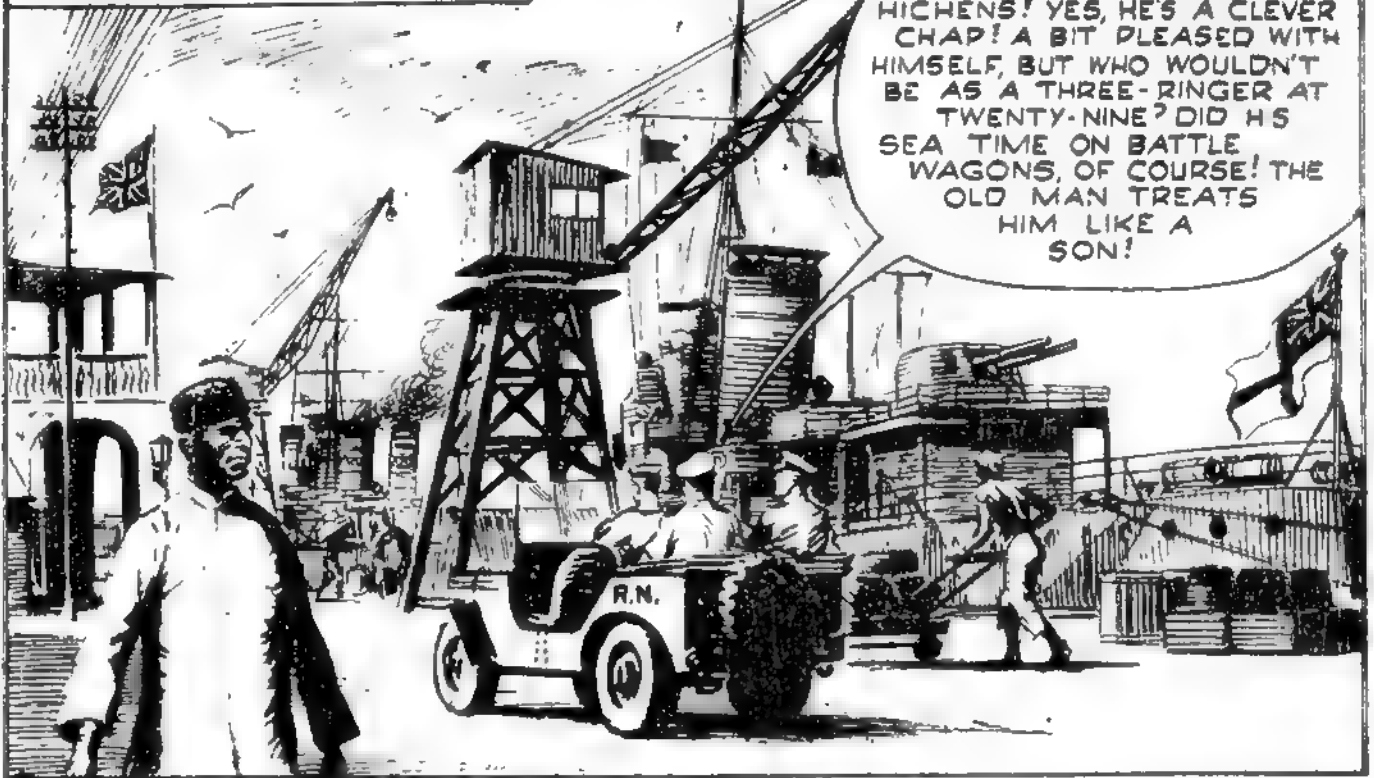


A RAPID SMILE CAME OVER THE GIRL'S FACE AT THE MENTION OF DESMOND HICHENS.



MICHAEL GRAHAM'S WORDS WERE CASUAL, BUT THIS APPARENTLY POPULAR YOUNG COMMANDER INTERESTED HIM STRANGELY.

GOOD OF YOU TO GIVE ME A LIFT, OLD MAN! YOU WERE ASKING ABOUT HICHENS! YES, HE'S A CLEVER CHAP! A BIT PLEASED WITH HIMSELF, BUT WHO WOULDN'T BE AS A THREE-RINGER AT TWENTY-NINE? DID H'S SEA TIME ON BATTLE WAGONS, OF COURSE! THE OLD MAN TREATS HIM LIKE A SON!



OBVIOUSLY COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS WAS QUITE A MAN. IT WAS AN ODDLY IRRITABLE MIKE GRAHAM WHO RETURNED TO THE THORN.

ANY NEWS, SIR?



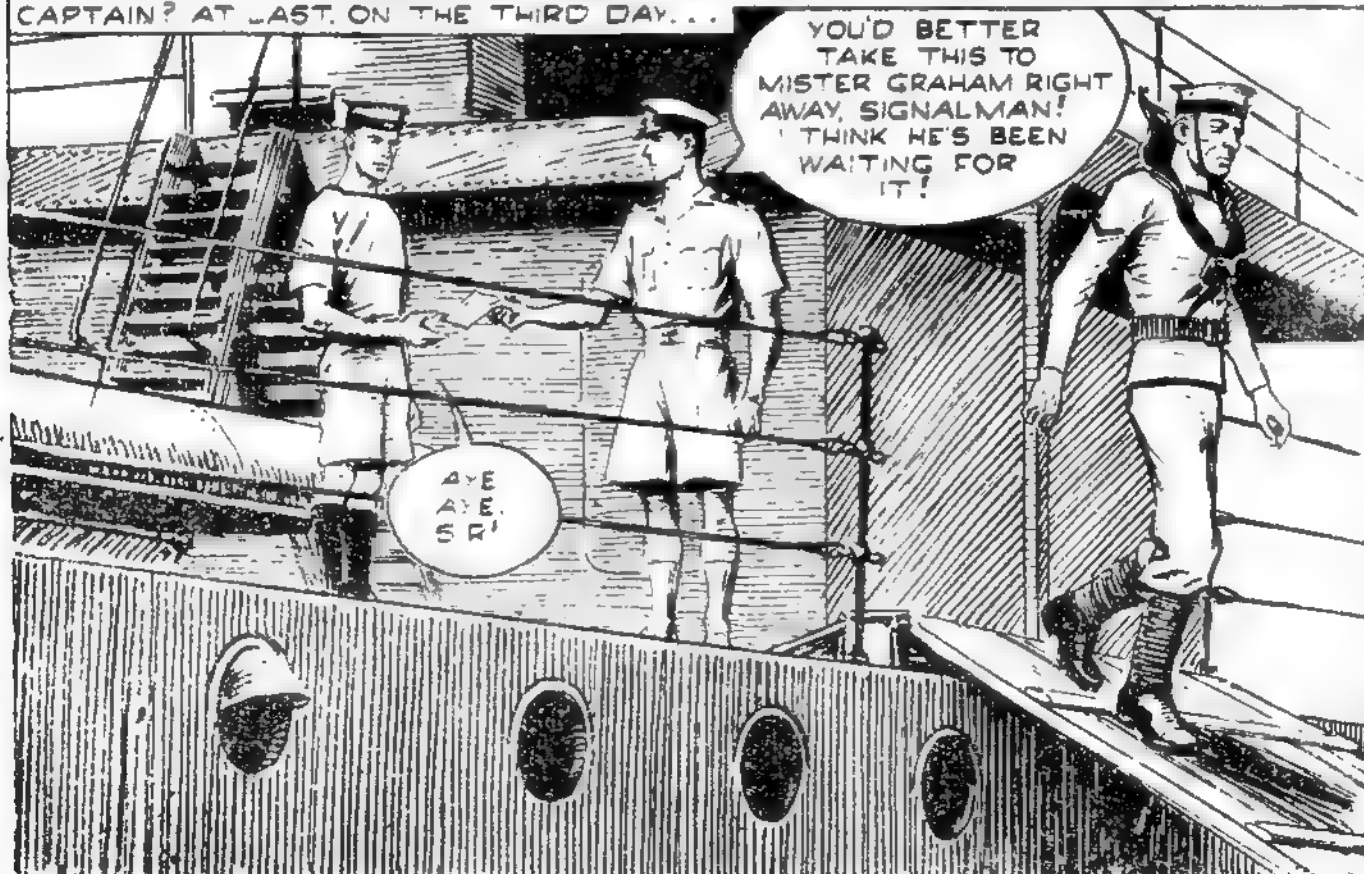
NO! WHY SHOULD THERE BE? AND WHY ARE THOSE MEN LAZING ABOUT THERE? YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO KEEP THEM WORKING!

Enemy Engaged

THE RASP IN THEIR FIRST LIEUTENANT'S VOICE WAS NOT LOST ON THE EARS OF THE LOWER DECK.



FOR THE NEXT TWO DAYS, EVERY MAN ON THE *THORN* WAITED ANXIOUSLY FOR THE ADMIRAL'S DECISION. WAS THEIR WELL-LIKED NUMBER ONE TO BE THE NEW CAPTAIN? AT LAST, ON THE THIRD DAY...



IT WAS SIGNALMAN KENNY WOOLF WHO TOOK THE FATEFUL SIGNAL TO LIEUTENANT MIKE GRAHAM. HE WAS A BOY OF NINETEEN, SENSITIVE AND QUICK-WITTED. AND AS HE WATCHED THE YOUNG OFFICER...

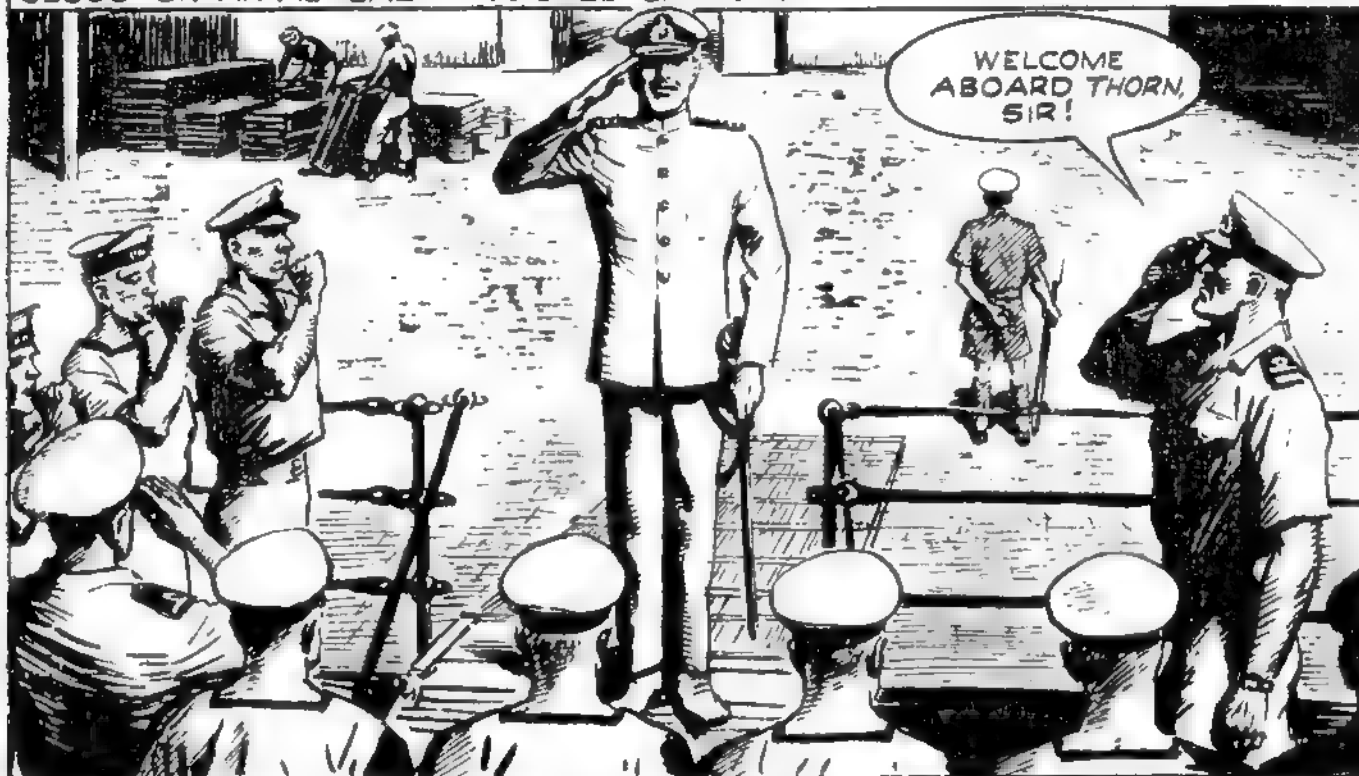


A SHADOW HAD PASSED OVER MIKE GRAHAM'S FACE. HIS LIPS HAD TWISTED BITTERLY. BUT WHEN HE SPOKE, HIS VOICE WAS EVEN AND QUIET.



Chapter 2. CAPTAIN'S ORDERS

REAR-ADMIRAL BLAZEY HAD MADE HIS DECISION, AND A CLEVER YOUNG COMMANDER HAD BEEN GIVEN HIS FIRST SHIP AND A CHANCE TO PUT A GLOSS ON AN ALREADY POLISHED CAREER.



DEBONAIR COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS BOARDED THE *THORN*. BUT HE HAD A BRIEF WORD OF SYMPATHY FOR THE STOLID FIRST LIEUTENANT.

THIS WAS THE ADMIRAL'S DECISION, GRAHAM! I TRIED TO DISSUADE HIM, BUT HE WOULDN'T LISTEN TO ME! I HOPE YOU BELIEVE THAT!



GRAHAM KNEW WHERE HIS DUTY LAY. ALREADY HE HAD BATTENED DOWN HIS DISAPPOINTMENT. HE WOULD BE AS LOYAL TO THIS NEW CAPTAIN AS HE HAD BEEN TO THE DEAD ROBBINS.

THIS IS OUR NAVIGATOR, PETER DOUGLAS, AND IAN MACNEIL FROM THE ENGINE-ROOM! THE GUNNER'S ASHORE! I THINK THAT'S THE LOT!

PLEASED TO MEET YOU, GENTLEMEN! I'M SURE WE'LL ALL GET ON VERY WELL TOGETHER! NOW, NUMBER ONE, I'VE GOT ORDERS FOR THE THORN I WANT TO PASS ON TO YOU!

BUT MIKE'S FELLOW OFFICERS DID NOT FEEL THE SAME. THE DOOR HAD HARDLY CLOSED BEHIND THE NEW CAPTAIN WHEN...

WELL, I THINK IT'S A CRYING SHAME!

AYE! HE'S CHARMING ENOUGH, BUT HE'LL NEED TO BE A SIGHT MORE CHARMING BEFORE HE'LL CONVINCE ME THAT HE'LL MAKE A BETTER SKIPPER THAN MIKE!



WHEN THE FIRST LIEUTENANT GOT BACK TO THE WARDROOM, THE PROTEST MEETING WAS WELL UNDER WAY. BUT MIKE GRAHAM'S FACE DARKENED.

WHY ON EARTH DID THEY SEND US THAT GOLDEN BOY, MIKE...

STOW IT PETER! IF I HEAR ANY MORE OF THAT KIND OF TALK, I'LL CRACK DOWN ON YOU HARD! COMMANDER HICHENS IS A FINE OFFICER! REMEMBER THAT!



THE FIRST LIEUTENANT WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR DISCIPLINE ON THE SHIP. AND HE WOULD NOT LET HIS OWN PERSONAL FEELINGS INTERFERE WITH THAT DUTY.

LET'S FORGET IT, PETER, AND GET THE CREASES OUT OF YOUR CHARTS! THE SKIPPER'S JUST TOLD ME WE'RE TRANSFERRING BASE FROM TRINCO TO SYDNEY! WE'RE CARRYING THE WAR TO THE JAPS. COME TO THE WHEELHOUSE!



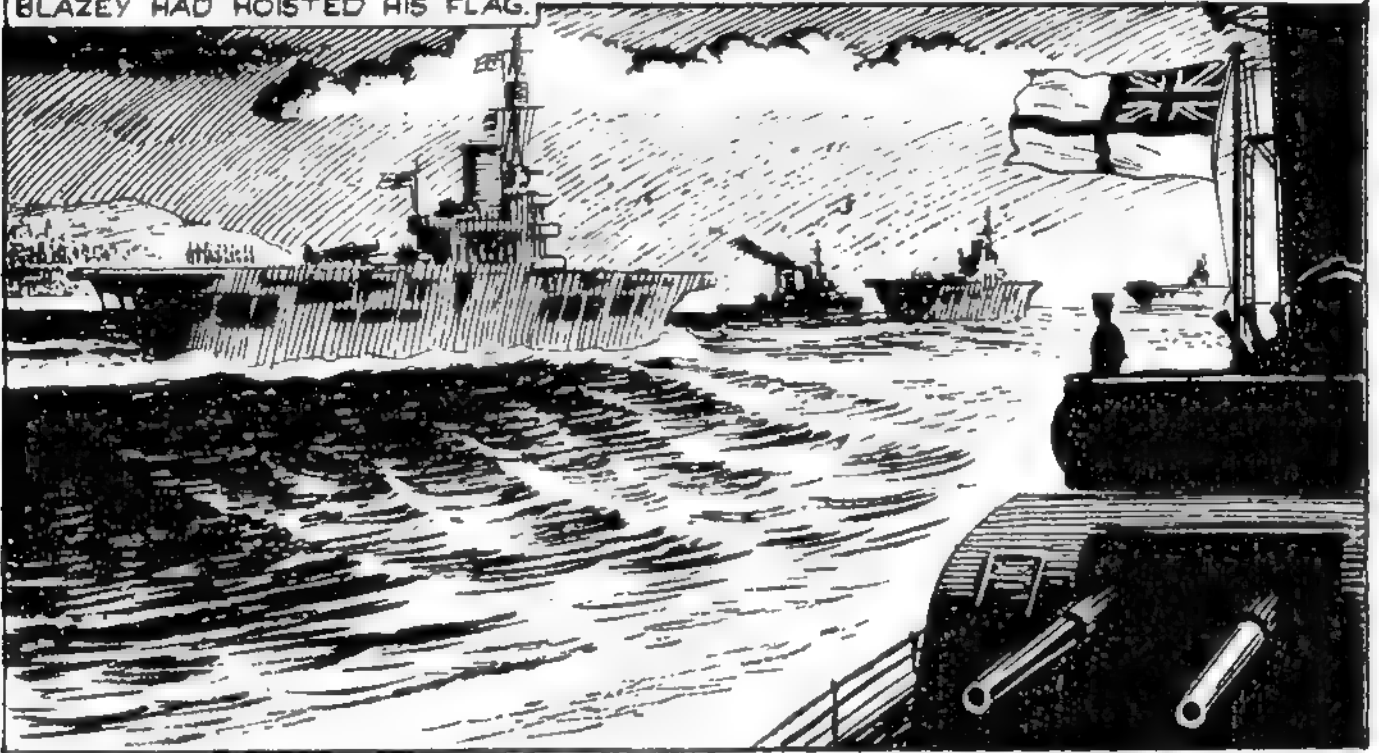
BIG CHANGES WERE AFOOT IN THE FAR EASTERN WAR. TWO NEW FLEETS WERE TO BE FORMED, AND H.M.S. THORN WOULD JOIN THE CRACK PACIFIC FLEET BASED ON SYDNEY IN AUSTRALIA. SOON THE JAP-DOMINATED PACIFIC WATERS WOULD BE ABLAZE WITH THE FIRES OF WAR.

WE SAIL AT DAWN ON THE TWENTY-NINTH WITH THREE CARRIERS! BIG PICKINGS FOR THE THORN!

WELL, HOPE SO... NUMBER ONE!



THREE WEEKS LATER, THE FIRST SHIPS OF THE NEW PACIFIC FLEET SAILED OUT OF TRINCOMALEE BOUND FOR SYDNEY. THEY INCLUDED THREE OF THE ROYAL NAVY'S CRACK AIRCRAFT CARRIERS, AND IN ONE OF THEM, REAR-ADMIRAL BLAZEY HAD HOISTED HIS FLAG.



ON THE BRIDGE OF THE THORN, THE OFFICERS AWAITED THEIR CAPTAIN. THIS WAS COMMANDER HICHEN'S FIRST SEA-GOING COMMAND, BUT NO FLICKER OF TENSION SHOWED ON THAT BRONZED AND HANDSOME FACE.

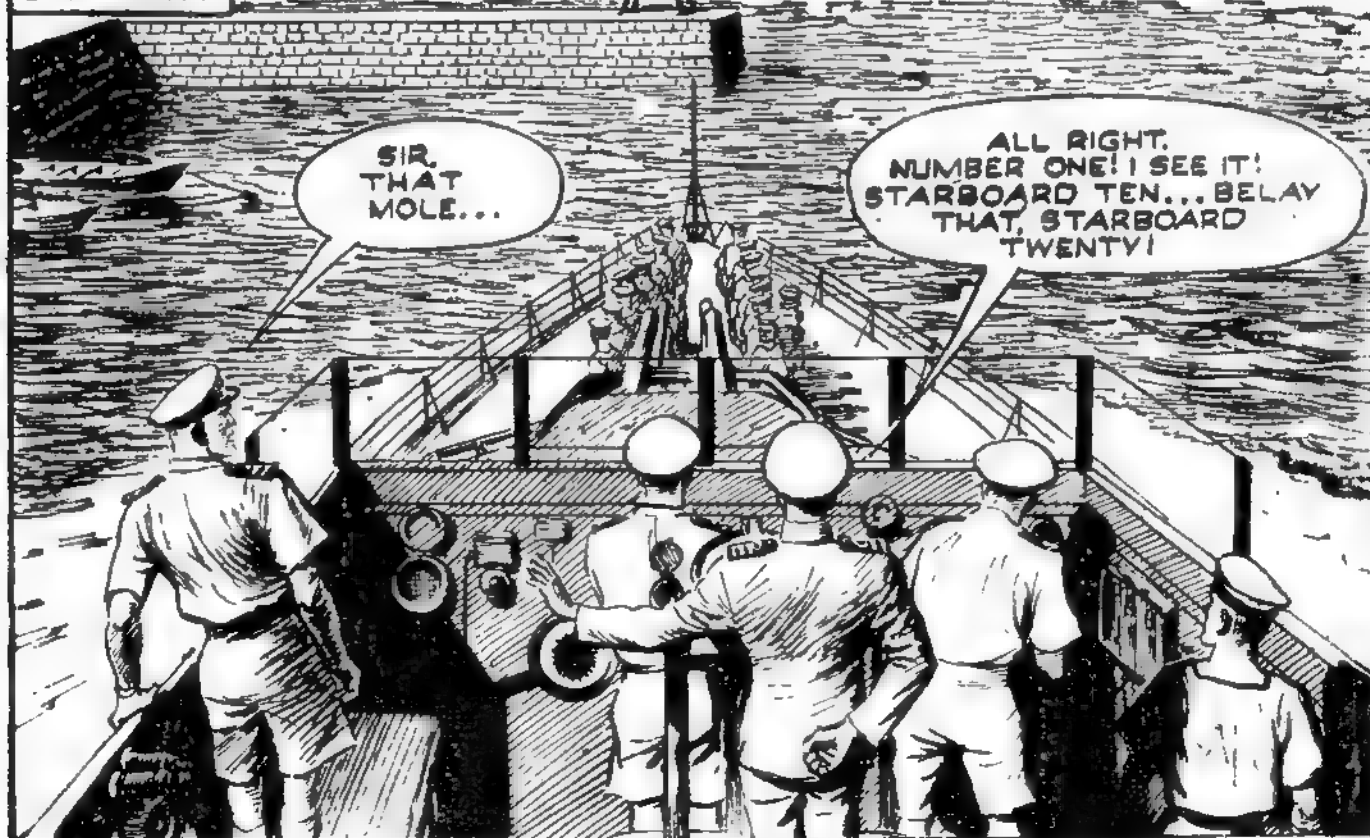


Enemy Engaged

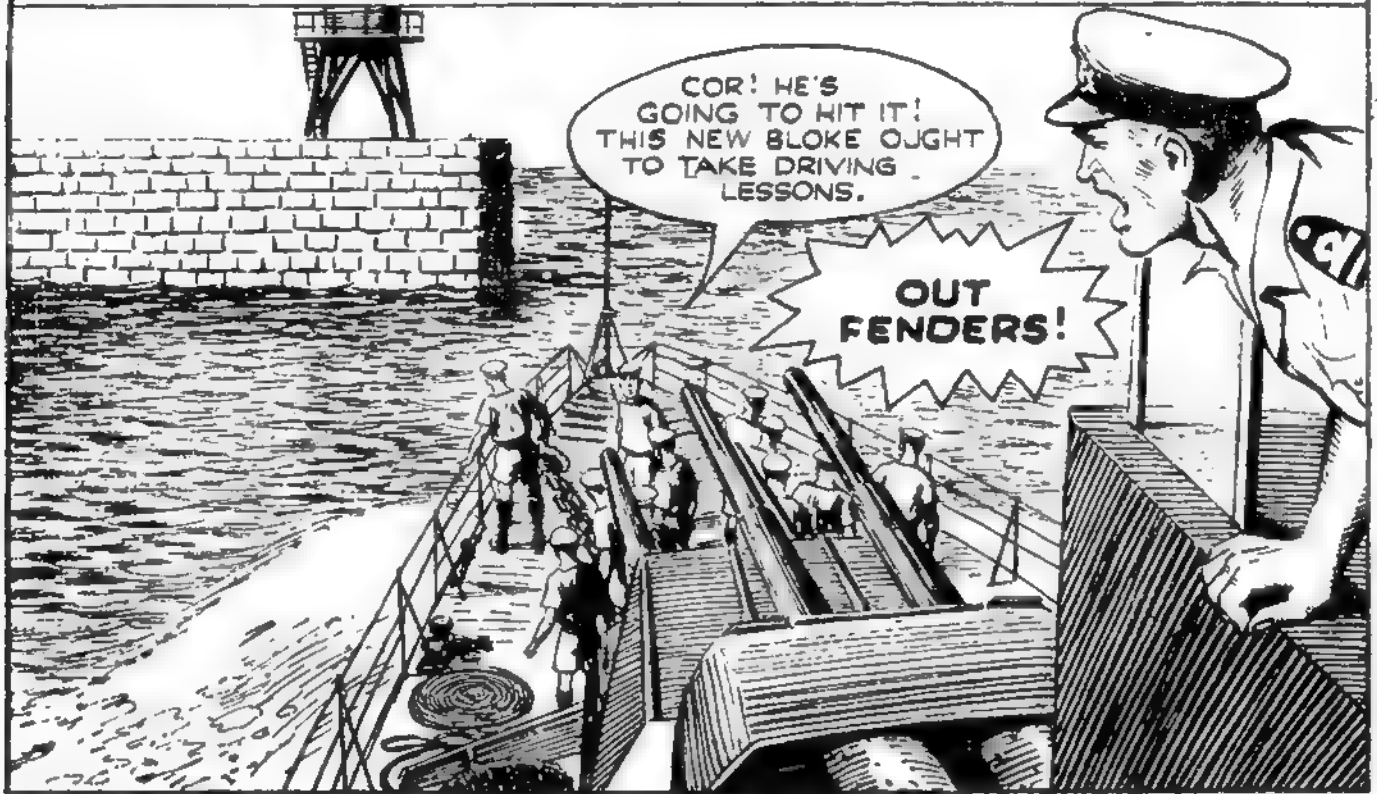
WITH A TREMOR IN HER SCRUBBED DECKS, THE THORN NOSED AWAY FROM THE JETTY. HER NEW CAPTAIN'S ORDERS WERE FIRM AND CONFIDENT. BUT LIEUTENANT GRAHAM CROSSED SUDDENLY TO THE WING OF THE BRIDGE.



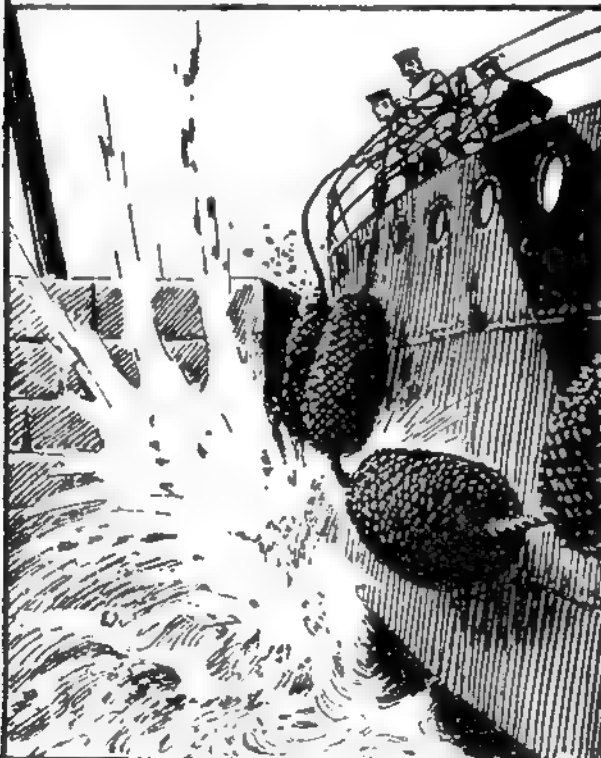
AHEAD OF THE DESTROYER, A STONE MOLE RAN OUT AT RIGHT ANGLES FROM THE JETTY. ON HER PRESENT COURSE, THE WARSHIP WOULD HIT IT. UNEASILY, THE FIRST LIEUTENANT TURNED TO HIS NONCHALANTLY SMILING SKIPPER...



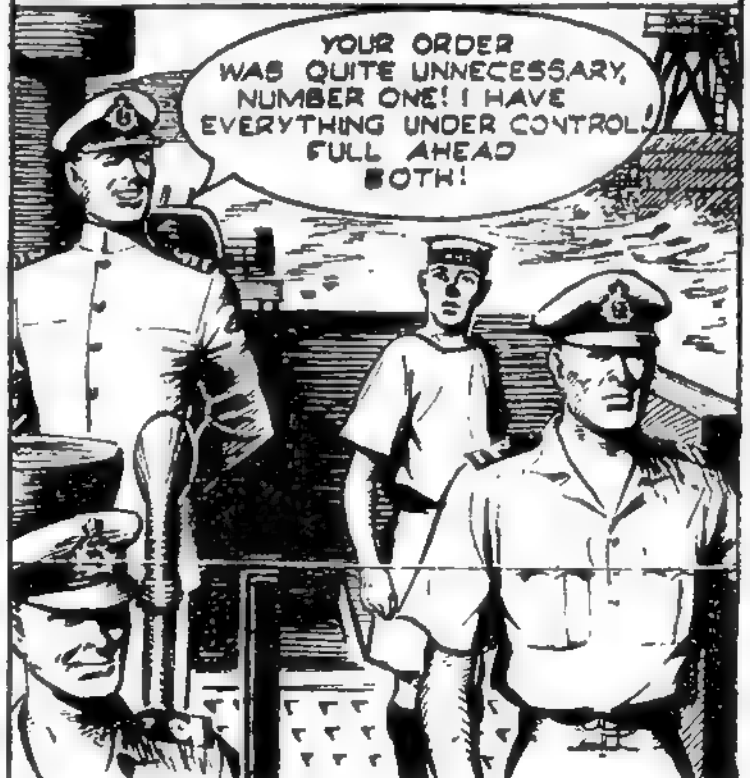
DESPITE HIS CONFIDENT SMILE, A SUDDEN HESITATION HAD CREEPT INTO COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS' VOICE. THE SHARP BOWS OF THE DESTROYER WERE SLIDING FORWARD TOO FAST AND TURNING AWAY TOO SLOWLY...



HURRIEDLY, THE ROPE FENDERS WERE LOWERED OVER THE SHIP'S BOWS JUST IN TIME TO TAKE THE RASPING SHOCK AS H.M.S. THORN STRUCK THE MOLE A GLANCING BLOW.



AN ORDINARY MAN HANDLING HIS FIRST COMMAND AND COMMITTING SUCH AN ELEMENTARY BLUNDER OF SEAMANSHIP, WOULD EITHER HAVE SWORN OR LAUGHED. BUT COMMANDER HICHENS WAS NO ORDINARY MAN.



Enemy Engaged

WITH LOFTY UNCONCERN, THE THORN'S NEW CAPTAIN CONNED HIS SHIP INTO CLEAR WATER WITH NO FURTHER MISHAP AND AS HE TURNED TO LEAVE THE BRIDGE, THE LOOK HE GAVE HIS SECOND-IN-COMMAND WAS BLEAK...



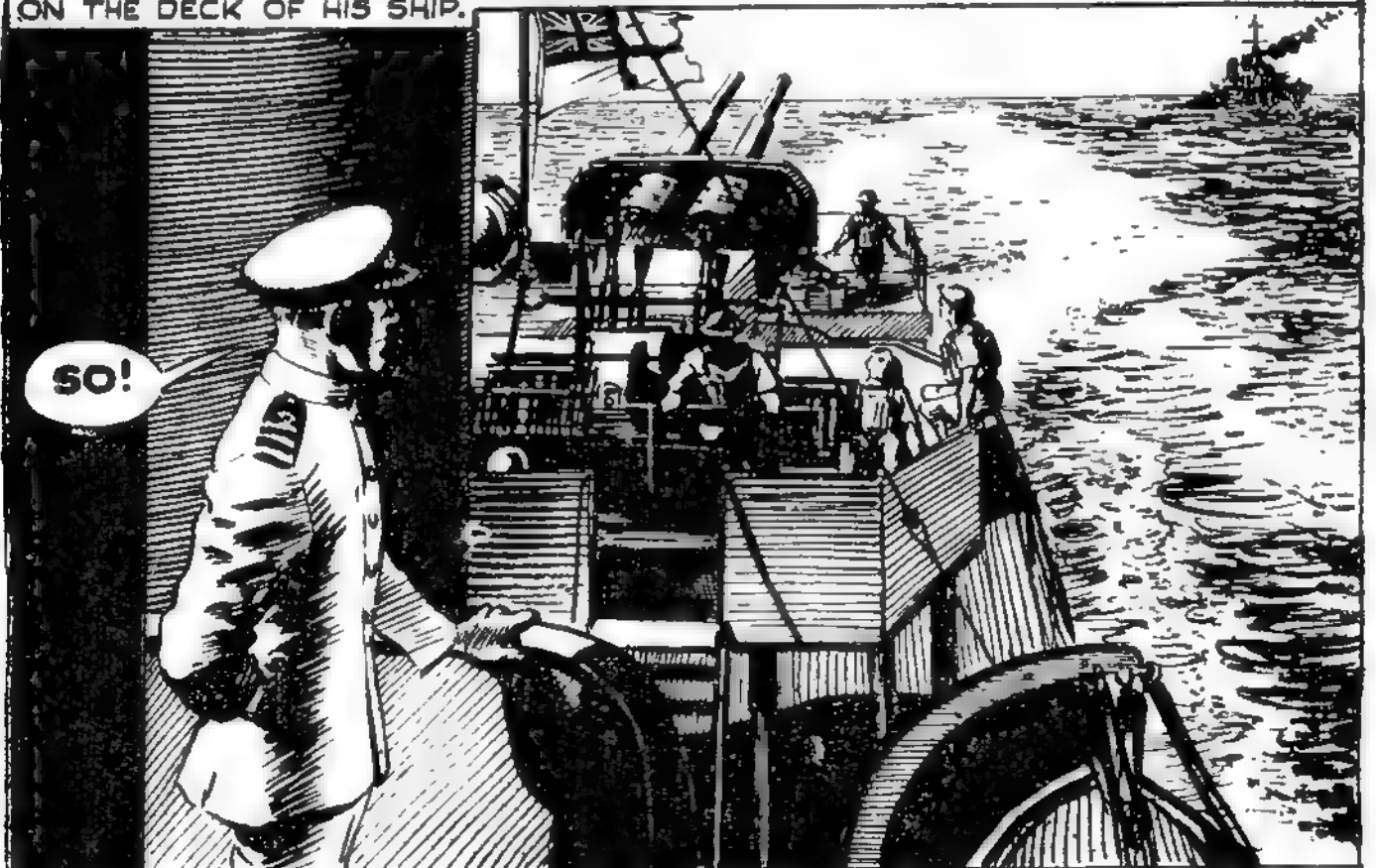
FOR A BRIEF MOMENT, ANGER BURNED HARD AND DANGEROUS IN GRAHAM'S HEART. THEN HE SAW THE SMILES AND SYMPATHY ON THE FACES OF HIS SHIPMATES AND THE FIRST LIEUTENANT'S SENSE OF DUTY CRUSHED HIS RESENTMENT.



MIKE GRAHAM DID NOT ALLOW HIMSELF TO WONDER ABOUT THIS FIRST EVIDENCE OF HIS COMMANDING OFFICER'S CHARACTER. THERE WAS MUCH TO DO FOR THE EXECUTIVE OFFICER ON A ROYAL NAVAL SHIP ENTERING ENEMY WATERS.



THROUGHOUT THAT STRONG BRITISH FORCE, SURE HANDS WAITED NEAR THEIR GUNS, KEEN EYES SEARCHED THE CLEAR PACIFIC HORIZON BUT ON THE *THORN*, THE COMMANDING OFFICER'S EYES WERE CONCENTRATED ON THE DECK OF HIS SHIP.



Enemy Engaged

LIEUTENANT GRAHAM TURNED TO FACE HIS CAPTAIN AS HICHENS' SILKY VOICE ADDRESSED HIM FROM THE BRIDGE LADDER.

SINCE YOU'RE SO CONCERNED ABOUT THE THORNS' PAINTWORK, NUMBER ONE, I SUGGEST YOU GET THE MEN TO WORK ON IT! IT'S A DISGRACE!

BUT GUN CREWS ARE CLOSED UP, SIR!



THE SMILE ON DESMOND HICHENS' FACE WAS COLD NOW, AND SARCASTIC...

SO I NOTICED! THEY SEEM TO BE ENJOYING THIS WAR! WELL, THEY'RE NOT GOING TO LIE BASKING THEMSELVES IN THE SUN ON MY SHIP! GET THEM TO WORK!

SIR, THE JAPS DON'T WARN US WHEN THEY SEND IN THEIR BOMBERS! THEY'RE DOWN ON US BEFORE A MAN CAN CROSS THE DECK! WE HAVE TO KEEP THE GUN CREWS CLOSED UP ALL THE TIME.



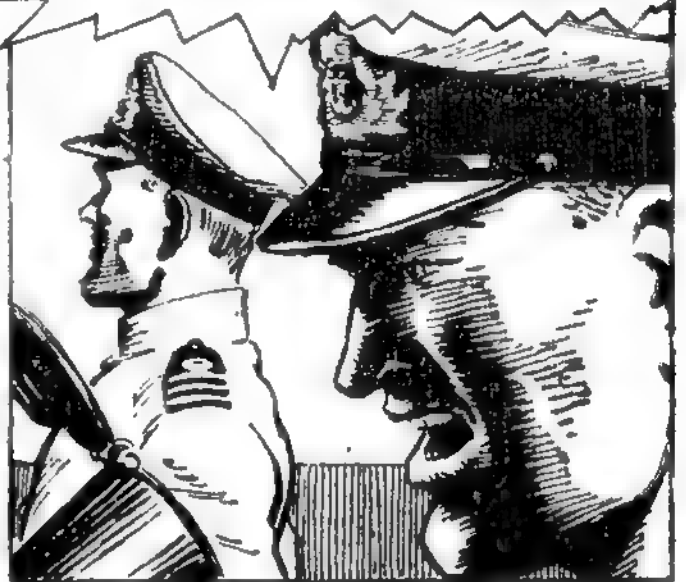
THE FIRST LIEUTENANT TRIED RESPECTFULLY TO SHOW THE DANGER OF HIS ORDER TO THE NEW CAPTAIN. COMMANDER HICHENS HAD NOT YET SAILED AGAINST THE JAPANESE, BUT HE DID NOT INTEND TO TAKE ADVICE FROM A JUNIOR OFFICER.



WE HAVE TO, MISTER GRAHAM? AREN'T YOU LETTING YOUR EXAGGERATED FEAR OF THE JAPANESE LEAD YOU INTO AN ATTITUDE OF DISRESPECT TO A SUPERIOR OFFICER? I BELIEVE I GAVE YOU AN ORDER!

STUNG BY THAT TAUNTING VOICE TO GRIM ACTION, MIKE GRAHAM FLICKED ON THE LOUDHAILER. HIS HARSH WORDS ECHOED OVER THE THORN'S DECK.

GUN CREWS STAND DOWN! BOTH WATCHES WILL REPORT TO THE COX'N FOR PAINT AND BRUSHES! GET THE MEN TO WORK, COX'N! CAPTAIN'S ORDERS!



GRUMBLING AND UNEASY, THE CREW LEFT THEIR GUNS TO PICK UP PAINT BRUSHES.

RIPE CHARLIE WE'LL LOOK IF THE NIPS CATCH US WITH PAINT BRUSHES IN OUR HANDS INSTEAD OF GUNS.

I TOLD YOU THE NEW SKIPPER WAS A BIG-HEAD! COR THE NAVY FINDS 'EM DOESN'T IT!



Enemy Engaged

ON THE BRIDGE, COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS WAS HIS OLD CHARMING SELF AGAIN. BUT HIS FIRST LIEUTENANT HARDLY HEARD THE FRIENDLY WORDS. THE FIGHTING MAN'S AWARENESS OF DANGER WAS STIRRING IN HIS MIND...



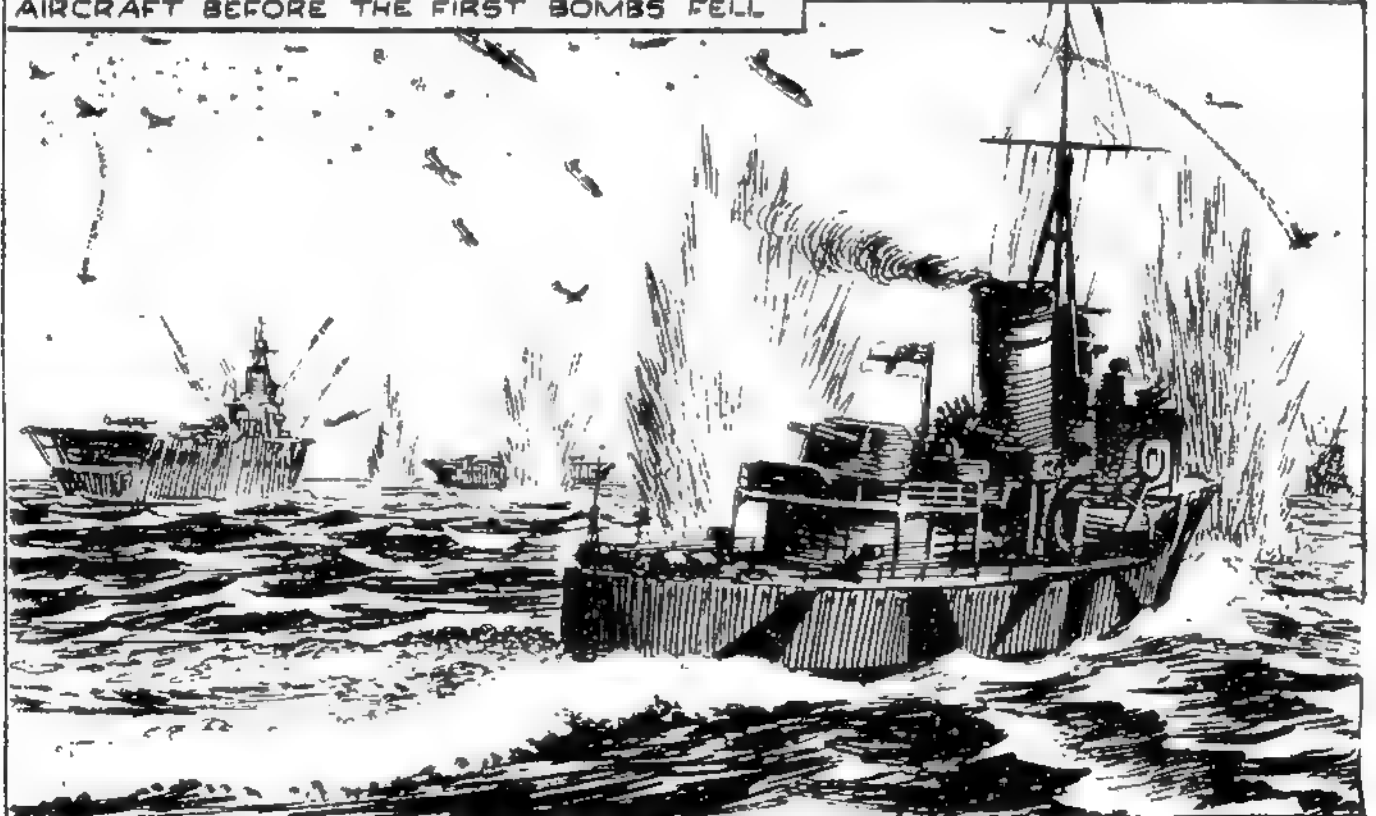
ONE SECOND AGO THE BLUE SKY HAD BEEN CLEAR, THE CALM SEA TRANQUIL, BUT THIS WAS THE PACIFIC, 1944, AND AS THE WHINE OF AERO ENGINES GREW IN THE EAST...



AT THE LOOK-OUT'S SHARP CRY, COMMANDER HICHENS' MOUTH GAPED OPEN BEWILDERED, HE STOOD AND STARED IT WAS THE FIRST LIEUTENANT WHO GRASPED THE REINS OF THE SHIP AT THAT CRITICAL MOMENT. BUT THE SHIP WAS UNPREPARED...



THE CREW OF THE THORN WERE STILL SCRAMBLING IN A WILD CONFUSION FOR THEIR GUNS WHEN THE TWIN-ENGINE JAPANESE BETTY BOMBERS CAME IN. VICIOUS FIRE FROM THE NAVAL SQUADRON WAS BRACKETING THE AIRCRAFT BEFORE THE FIRST BOMBS FELL

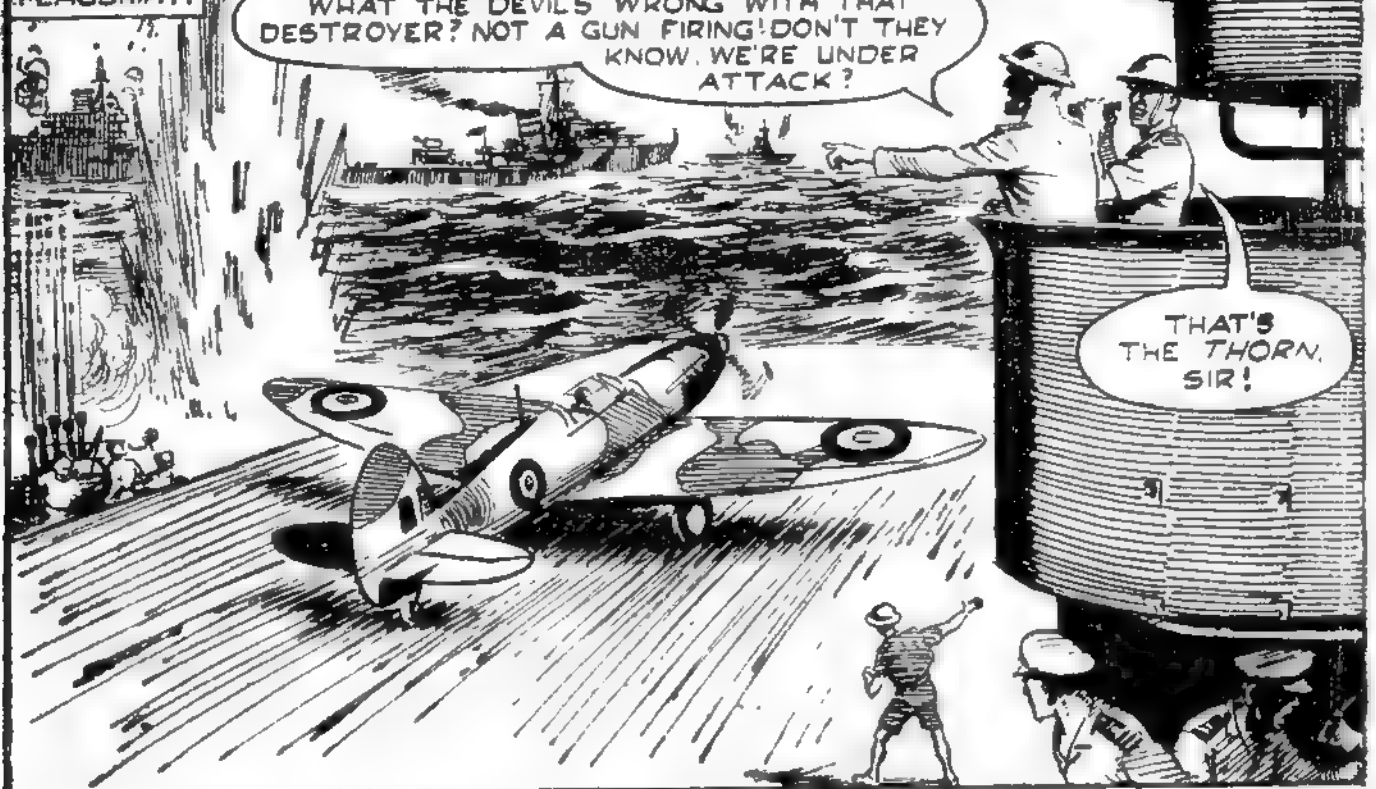


Enemy Engaged

IN ALL THAT GREAT COMPANY OF SHIPS, ONLY ONE WAS SILENT. HEELING TO THE SHOCK OF THE EXPLODING BOMBS, H.M.S. THORN HAD NO ANSWER WITH HER UNMANNED GUNS TO THE SAVAGE JAPANESE ATTACK. AND ON THE FLAGSHIP...

WHAT THE DEVIL'S WRONG WITH THAT DESTROYER? NOT A GUN FIRING! DON'T THEY KNOW WE'RE UNDER ATTACK?

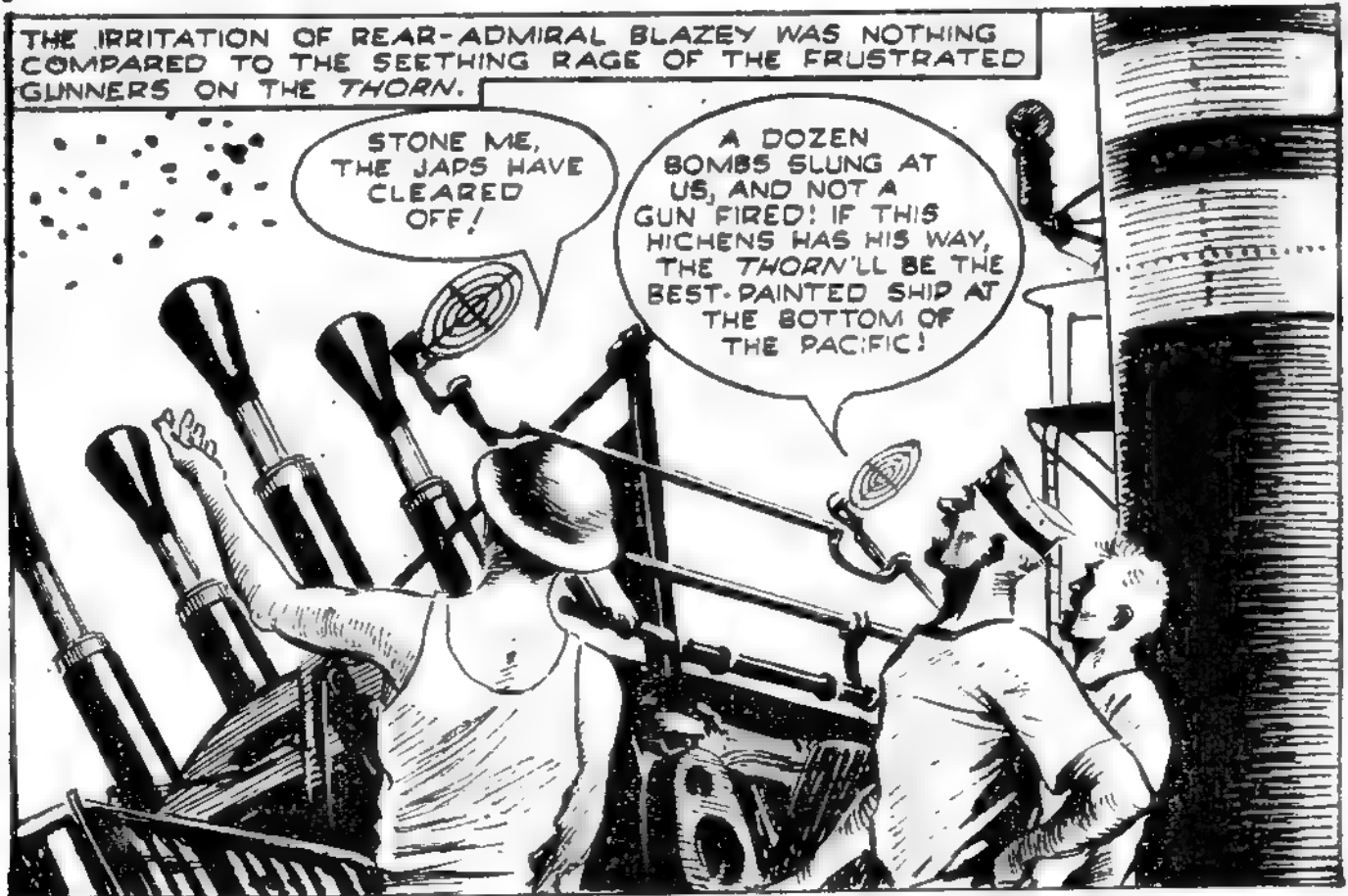
THAT'S THE THORN, SIR!



THE IRRITATION OF REAR-ADMIRAL BLAZEY WAS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE SEETHING RAGE OF THE FRUSTRATED GUNNERS ON THE THORN.

STONE ME, THE JAPS HAVE CLEARED OFF!

A DOZEN BOMBS SLUNG AT US, AND NOT A GUN FIRED! IF THIS HICHENS HAS HIS WAY, THE THORN'LL BE THE BEST-PAINTED SHIP AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PACIFIC!



ALREADY THE HELLCATS FROM TWO OF THE CARRIERS HAD TORN INTO THE UNWIELDY RANKS OF THE JAPANESE BOMBERS AND DRIVEN THEM OFF. THE THORN WAS TOO LATE, AND HER CAPTAIN KNEW IT AS WELL AS HER MEN.



I'M SORRY I GAVE THAT ORDER TO THE GUNS, SIR! I JUST THOUGHT...

ALL RIGHT, MISTER GRAHAM! YOU'VE SCORED THIS TIME! I HOPE YOU'RE SATISFIED!

MIKE GRAHAM WAS FRANKLY BEWILDERED BY THE NEW CAPTAIN'S ATTITUDE. HE HAD EXPECTED ANGER, BUT NOT AN ANGER DIRECTED AT HIM...



I'M ONLY THINKING OF THE SHIP, SIR!

NO, LIEUTENANT, YOU'RE TRYING TO MAKE ME LOOK A FOOL IN FRONT OF THE MEN! WELL, I'LL SEE YOU DON'T GET A SECOND CHANCE!

Enemy Engaged

FOR THE SECOND TIME IN THE FIRST FEW HOURS OF THAT FATEFUL VOYAGE, THE STOLID FIRST LIEUTENANT HAD BEEN UNJUSTLY ACCUSED BY HIS CAPTAIN. HE HAD DONE HIS LOYAL BEST TO SUPPORT THE COMMANDER AND THIS WAS THE RESULT...

SIGNAL FROM FLAGSHIP, SIR! ALL COMMANDING OFFICERS WILL REPORT IN PERSON TO FLAG CAPTAIN AT SEVENTEEN HUNDRED HOURS.

ALL RIGHT, WOOLF GIVE THEM THE WILCO!

PREOCCUPIED WITH HIS THOUGHTS, THE FIRST LIEUTENANT AUTHORISED THE REPLY TO THE SIGNAL AND TURNED AWAY. BUT AS KENNY WOOLF TURNED TO THE LAMP...

I'D BETTER MAKE IT NICE AND SIMPLE FOR THOSE CLOTS ON THE CURLEW. COMMANDER HICHENS WILL REPORT ON BOARD FLAGSHIP AT SEVENTEEN HUNDRED HOURS.

THE CLEAR YOUNG VOICE OF THE SIGNALMAN BROUGHT A BLACK SCOWL TO THE HANDSOME FACE OF THE THORN'S COMMANDING OFFICER...

WHAT THE DEVIL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?

HERE, LET GO OF ME...



NOT SEEING WHO HAD GRABBED HIM BY THE ARM, KENNY YELPED AGGRESSIVELY. THEN HE SAW IT WAS HIS COMMANDING OFFICER...



DESMOND HICHENS' RAGE HAD BEWILDERED THE OFFICERS AND MEN ON THE BRIDGE. BUT AS HE GLOWERED DOWN AT THE YOUNG SEAMAN, THE FIRST LIEUTENANT STEPPED FORWARD...



Enemy Engaged

FOR THE FIRST TIME, MIKE GRAHAM FACED UP TO HIS SUPERIOR OFFICER WITH SOMETHING LIKE SCORN IN HIS VOICE.



COMMANDER HICHENS TURNED AWAY FROM HIS SECOND-IN-COMMAND WITH A STONY FACE.

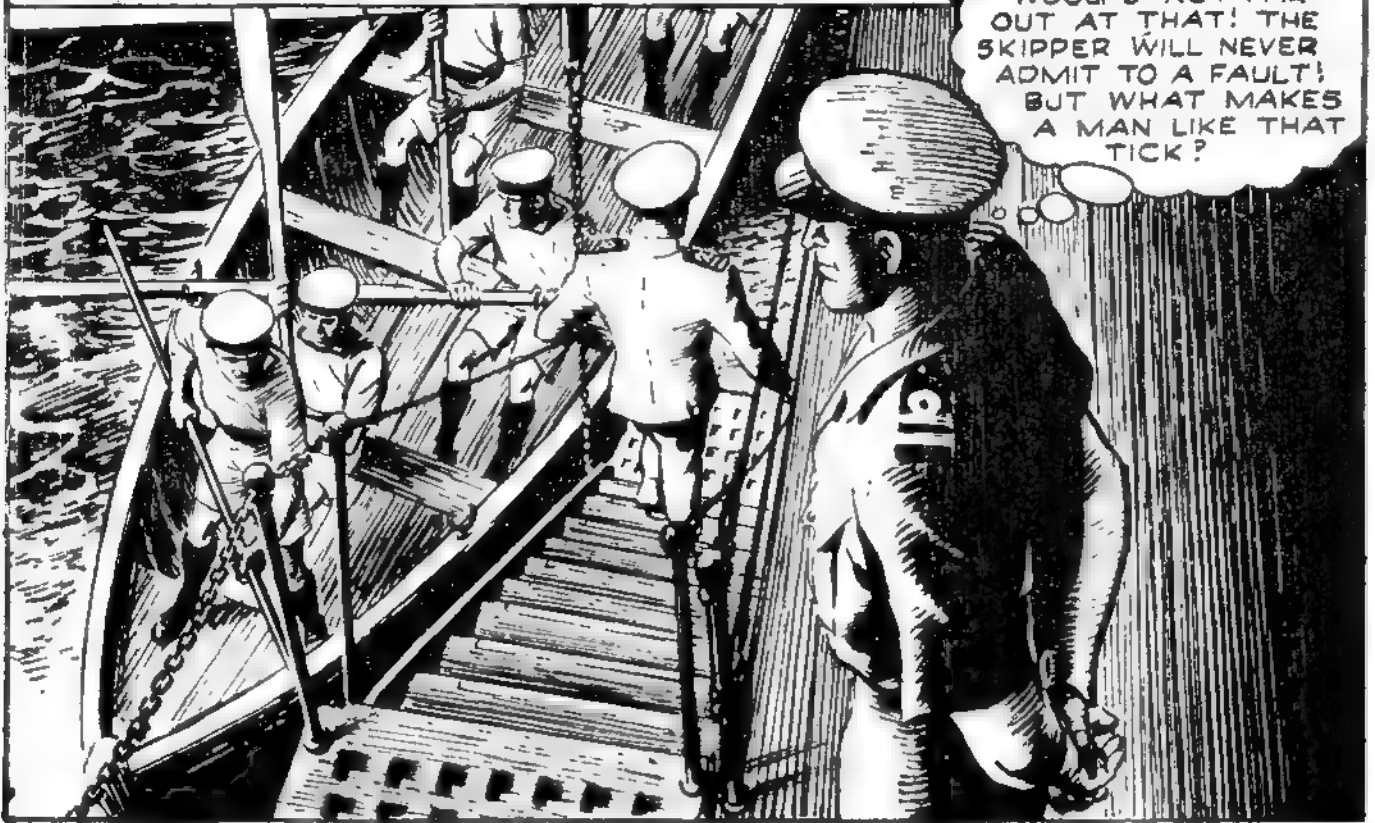


AS THE CAPTAIN LEFT THE BRIDGE, KENNY WOOLF CHEERFULLY EXPRESSED THE THOUGHTS OF EVERY MAN WITHIN EARSHOT, EVEN THE FIRST LIEUTENANT CONCEALED A SMILE AS HE REPRIMAND THE YOUNGSTER.



AT 1700 HOURS, GRAHAM WATCHED HIS SUPERIOR BOARD THE GIG, AND DID A LITTLE THINKING.

YOUNG WOOLF'S NOT FAR OUT AT THAT! THE SKIPPER WILL NEVER ADMIT TO A FAULT! BUT WHAT MAKES A MAN LIKE THAT TICK?



IF THE LIEUTENANT COULD HAVE SEEN COMMANDER HICHENS STEP ON BOARD THE FLAGSHIP, A CHARMING SMILE ON HIS FACE AND A SPRING IN HIS STEP, HE MIGHT HAVE LEARNED MORE ABOUT HIS COMMANDING OFFICER'S CHARACTER.

IF YOU'LL COME WITH ME, SIR! THE ADMIRAL IS EXPECTING YOU!

AH GOOD, GOOD!



Enemy Engaged

IN THE STATE CABIN OF THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER, THE INFORMAL CONFERENCE HAD ALREADY BEGUN.

“AH, DESMOND SIT DOWN! I'D ONLY JUST STARTED! I ASKED YOU AND THE OTHER GENTLEMEN HERE TO TELL ME THAT INTEND TO GIVE OUR GUNNERS A LITTLE TARGET PRACTICE ON THIS VOYAGE TO SYDNEY. THE JAPS HAVE AN OIL REFINERY HERE IN THE PALEMBANG AREA OF SUMATRA...”



THE ADMIRAL'S PLAN WAS THAT THE COMBINED FLEET SHOULD ATTACK TARGETS IN JAP-HELD SUMATRA ON ITS WAY TO SYDNEY, AND WHEN THE CONFERENCE ENDED...

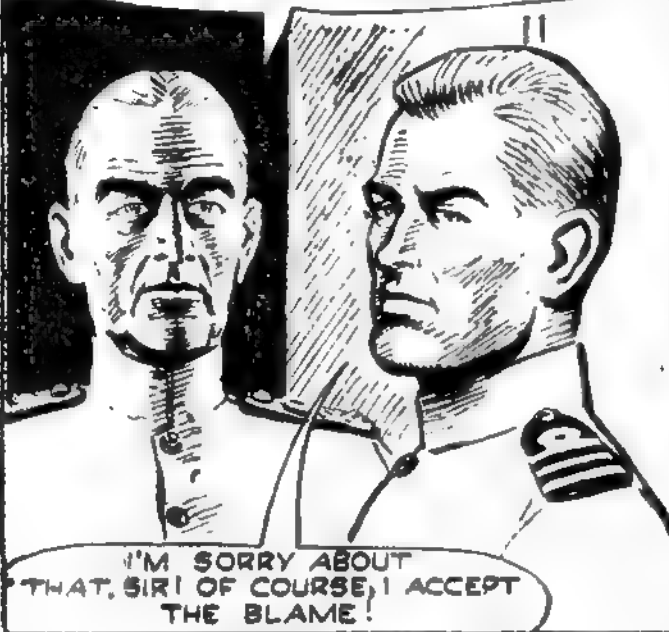
“WELL, GENTLEMEN, I THINK THAT'S ALL WE ATTACK ON THE TENTH OR DESMOND. MAY I HAVE A WORD WITH YOU?”

“OF COURSE, SIR!”



REAR-ADMIRAL BLAZEY HAD NOT FORGOTTEN THE QPD SILENCE OF THE THORN AS THE JAPANESE BOMBERS CAME IN...

WHY DID THE THORN FAIL TO OPEN FIRE DURING THE AIR ATTACK AT NOON, DESMOND? DON'T THINK I'M CRITICISING. I'M JUST CURIOUS.



A SHADOW OF DISCOMFORT HAD FALLEN ON DESMOND HICHENS' FACE AT THE SENIOR OFFICER'S QUESTION. BUT HIS VOICE WAS QUITE SMOOTH.



THE FACT IS SIR, THAT THE THORN'S CREW IS SLOVENLY, INEFFICIENT AND GENERALLY LAZY! I'M SORRY TO SAY THAT, BUT IT'S TRUE! I WAS HORRIFIED AT THE LAXITY OF DISCIPLINE ABOARD WHEN I TOOK OVER! OF COURSE, IT'S THE EXECUTIVE OFFICER'S JOB TO SEE TO THAT...

PERHAPS THE ADMIRAL DOUBTED THOSE PERSUASIVE WORDS. HIS FACE WAS GRAVE.



Chapter 3. **STRIKE FORCE**

WHEN COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS BOARDED THE THORN AGAIN TWENTY MINUTES LATER, HIS MANNER TOWARDS HIS SECOND-IN-COMMAND WAS MORE FRIENDLY THAN IT HAD BEEN SINCE HE FIRST TOOK COMMAND.

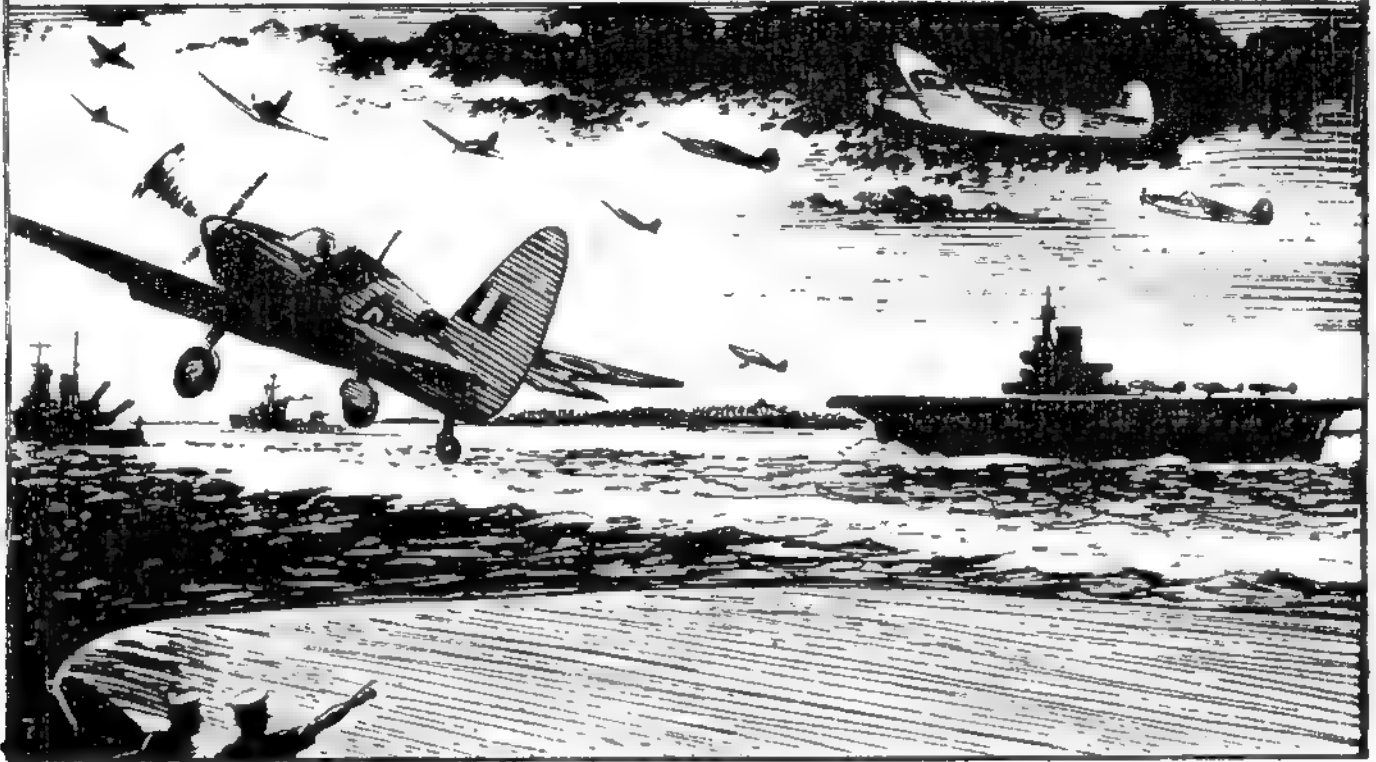


WITH A PUZZLED FROWN, MIKE WATCHED HIS COMMANDER WALK AWAY. WHAT HAD BEEN SAID ON THE FLAGSHIP TO CHANGE THE CAPTAIN'S ATTITUDE SO QUICKLY? ONLY THE FUTURE MIGHT TELL.

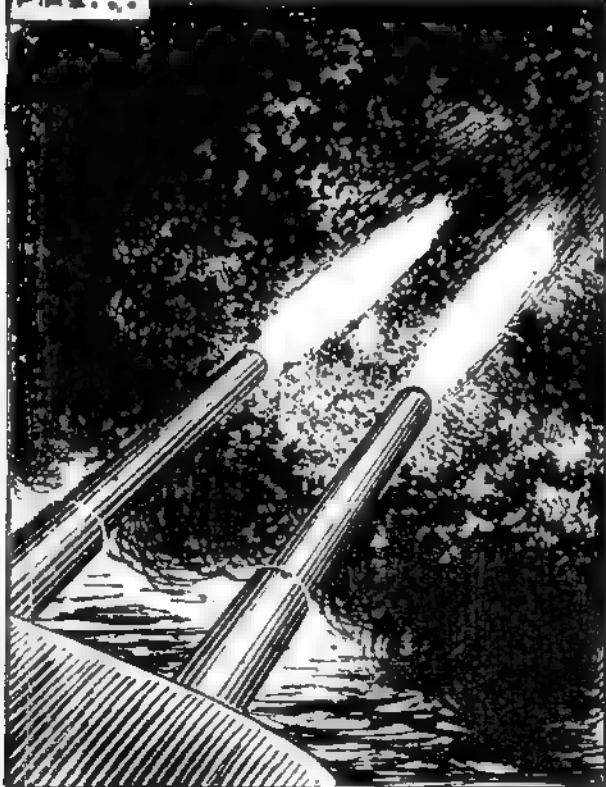


Enemy Engaged

THE FLEET STEAMED ON. TWO HUNDRED MILES WEST OF ENEMY-HELD SUMATRA IT CHANGED COURSE AND AS THE RISING SUN GILDED THE PACIFIC, THE RISING SUN OF A HATED FLAG FACED THE FURY OF BRITISH GUNS.



ALMOST WITHOUT OPPOSITION, SO WEAK HAD THE JAPANESE HOLD ON THE EASTERN SEA BECOME, THE BRITISH TASK FORCE CLOSED TO WITHIN TWO MILES OF THE ENEMY COASTLINE AND OPENED FIRE...



THE DESTROYERS RACED IN CLOSE BENEATH THE WHINING SHELLS OF THE BIG GUNS, TO FLING THEIR HIGH EXPLOSIVE AT THE ALREADY BLAZING OIL TANKS. THIS TIME H.M.S. THORN WAS VIOLENTLY THERE.



Enemy Engaged

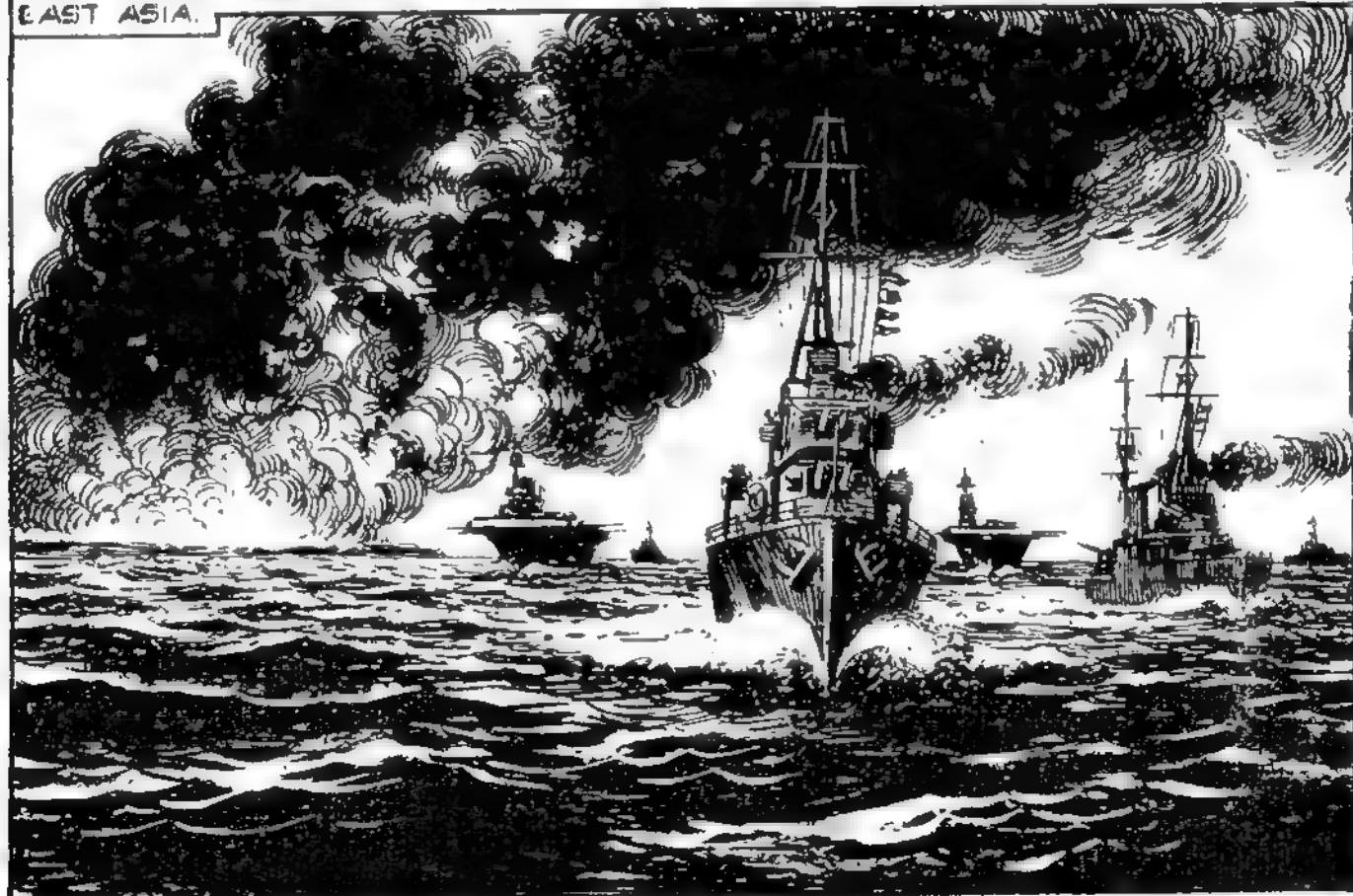
SINCE HIS INTERVIEW WITH THE ADMIRAL ON THE FLAGSHIP, COMMANDER HICHENS' MANNER SEEMED TO HAVE CHANGED. THE TENSION ON BOARD THE THORN HAD SLACKENED. . .

IT'S GOOD TO BE DISHING IT OUT AGAIN, INSTEAD OF, TAKING IT, EH NUMBER ONE?

IT CERTAINLY IS, SIR!



THE OIL REFINERIES OF SUMATRA WERE THE CHIEF SOURCE OF AVIATION FUEL TO THE JAPANESE AIR FORCES, AND THIS STRIKE BY THE BRITISH FLEET WAS TO HAVE A LASTING EFFECT ON THE COURSE OF THE BITTER WAR IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA.



Enemy Engaged

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THREE WEEKS AFTER THE SUMATRA ATTACK, THE BRITISH SHIPS REACHED THE GREAT PORT OF SYDNEY. THE SHIP'S COMPANY OF H.M.S. THORN HAD LOOKED FORWARD TO THIS DAY FOR WEEKS PAST, BUT ONE MAN AT LEAST GOT NO JOY FROM THE LANDFALL...



YOUNG KENNY WOOLF HAD FELT ILL FOR DAYS, BUT HIS PAIN WAS AS YET NO PROBLEM FOR THE FIRST LIEUTENANT. HIS COMMANDER'S MORE FRIENDLY MANNER HAD LIGHTENED THE LOAD ON MIKE GRAHAM'S MIND.



BUT WHEN MIKE WENT ASHORE LATER, HE MET A YOUNG LIEUTENANT FROM ANOTHER SHIP IN THE OFFICERS' CLUB...



YOU'RE NUMBER ONE ON THE THORN, AREN'T YOU? WHAT'S YOUR OLD MAN LIKE?

DESMOND HICHENS? WELL, HE WORRIED ME AT FIRST, BUT I THINK I'M NOW GETTING THE HANG OF HIM! WHY?

MIKE'S REPLY WAS CHEERFUL, BUT HIS FRIEND'S NEXT WORDS UNCOVERED HIS OWN LONG-STANDING DOUBTS ABOUT COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS.

MY SKIPPER HATES HIM LIKE POISON! NEVER COULD FIND OUT WHY!



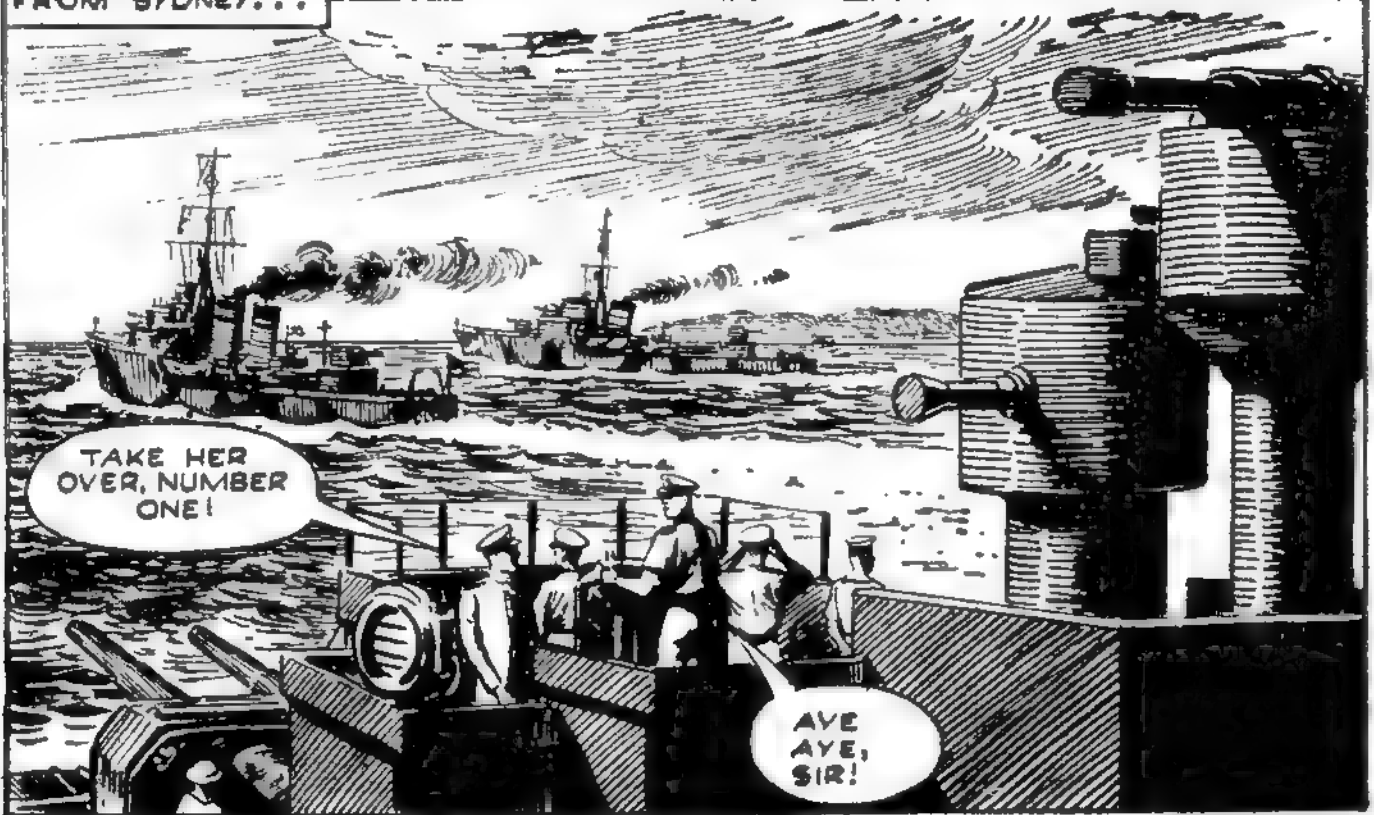
OH, IT'S HIS MANNER, I SUPPOSE! SOMETIMES IT'S A BIT UPPITY! I GET ON ALL RIGHT WITH HIM THESE DAYS!

WALKING BACK ALONE TO HIS SHIP, THE FIRST LIEUTENANT TRIED TO QUELL THE UNEASINESS IN HIS MIND.

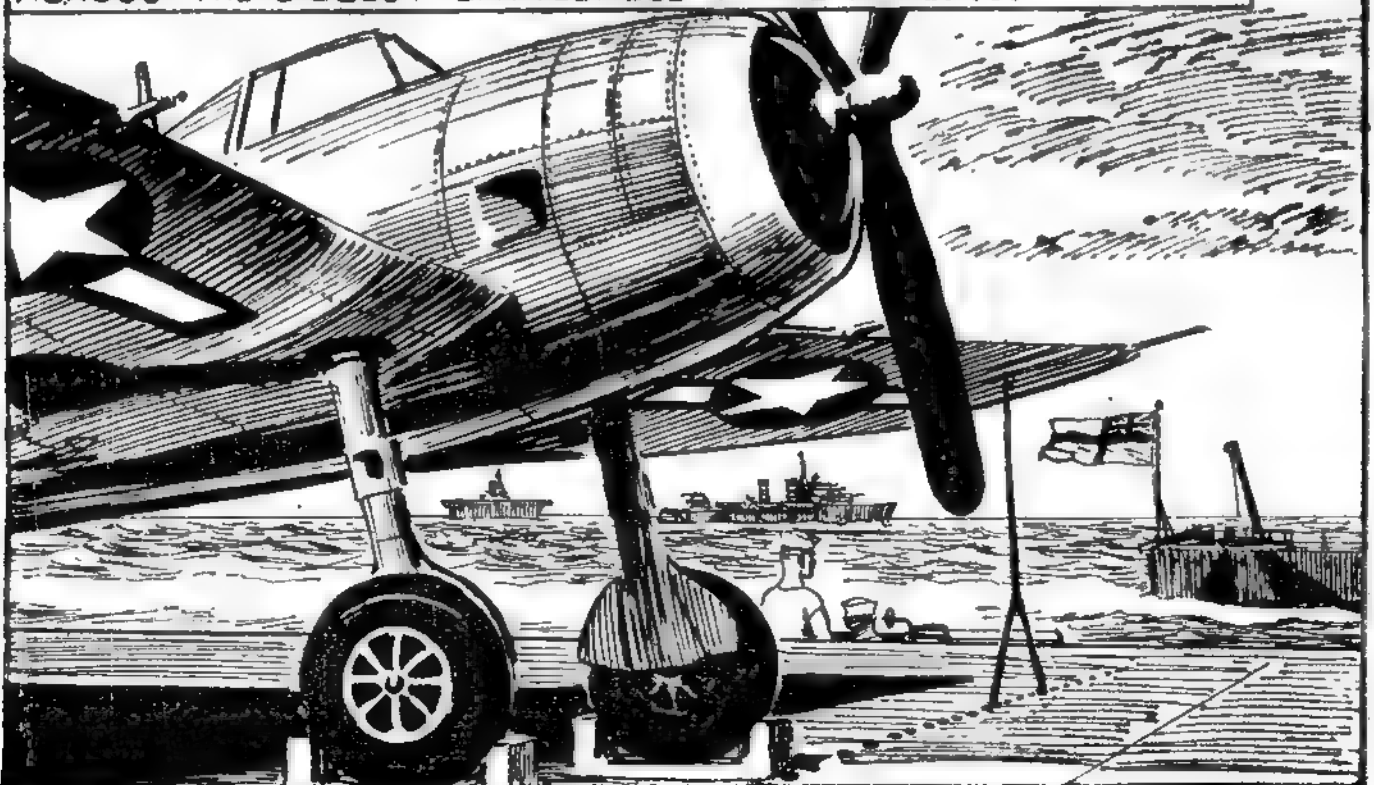
I'M NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO'S FALLEN FOUL OF THE SKIPPER, THEN! STILL, HE SEEMS FRIENDLY ENOUGH NOW! I WISH I KNEW... BUT I'D BETTER FORGET IT WITH THIS OKINAWA SHOW COMING OFF SOON!



THIS WAS NO TIME FOR DOUBTS. DEVELOPING THEIR SPRINGBOARD TACTICS FOR THE RECONQUEST OF THE PACIFIC, THE AMERICANS HAD SET THEIR SIGHTS ON THE SMALL JAPANESE-HELD ISLAND OF OKINAWA BETWEEN FORMOSA AND JAPAN. LATE IN MARCH, THE BRITISH PACIFIC FLEET SAILED FROM SYDNEY...



H.M.S. THORN WAS NOW PART OF TASK FORCE 72. BRITISH AND AMERICAN WARSHIPS WERE TO FIGHT SIDE BY SIDE IN THE BITTER FIGHTING AHEAD. FOR SIX DAYS THE GREAT FLEET PLOUGHED ON ACROSS THE BIGGEST BATTLEFIELD IN THE WORLD...



THE SEVENTH DAY WAS THE LAST BEFORE THE INVASION OF OKINAWA. ON THAT DAY, THE SHADOW WHICH HAD LIFTED FOR A WHILE FROM THE DECKS OF H.M.S. THORN, FELL AGAIN.



LIKE ANY EFFICIENT FIRST LIEUTENANT, MIKE GRAHAM WAS KEENLY CONCERNED FOR THE WELFARE OF HIS CREW. NOW HE MADE FOR THE BRIDGE LADDER.

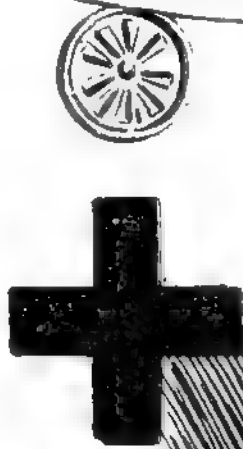


BELOW DECKS IN THE SICK BAY, A FEVERISH AND FRIGHTENED BOY WAS FIGHTING WITH A DEADLY PAIN.



THE SICK BERTH ATTENDANT'S VOICE WAS GRAVE...

I'M AFRAID IT'S APPENDICITIS, SIR! HE NEEDS PROPER MEDICAL ATTENTION, AN OPERATION!



I SEE! AND THERE'S NOT MUCH TIME, I SUPPOSE? I'LL HAVE A WORD WITH THE CAPTAIN RIGHT AWAY!

LIEUTENANT GRAHAM HURRIED TO COMMANDER HICHENS' CABIN. BUT THE COMMANDER WAS BUSY...

IT'S SIGNALMAN WOOLF, SIR! HE'S SERIOUSLY ILL WITH APPENDICITIS! HE NEEDS...

YES, YES, NUMBER ONE! BUT DON'T BOTHER ME NOW! IT'S IMPORTANT THAT WE PUT UP A GOOD SHOW TOMORROW, ISN'T IT? DO WHAT YOU THINK IS NECESSARY FOR THE RATING!



Enemy Engaged

THAT IRRITATED VOICE AND INDIFFERENT WAVE OF THE HAND BROUGHT AN UNEASY FROWN TO THE FIRST LIEUTENANT'S FACE. BUT HE HAD NO TIME NOW TO WORRY OVER HIS COMMANDER'S MANNER.

'RATING SERIOUSLY ILL WITH APPENDICITIS STOP MEDICAL FACILITIES URGENTLY REQUIRED STOP. PLEASE ADVISE STOP AND CODE IT TOP PRIORITY!



OVER A MILE OF OCEAN AS THE SUN SET ON THAT FATEFUL EVENING BEFORE THE INVASION OF OKINAWA, THE THORN'S URGENT MESSAGE FLASHED TO THE WIRELESS ANTENNAE OF THE FLAGSHIP, WITHIN MINUTES...

WHAT'S THE BUZZ ABOUT BUNTS, SPARKS?

JIMMY THE ONE SENT A PRIORITY SIGNAL JUST NOW! I'VE GOT THE REPLY HERE!



OBEYING STANDING ORDERS, THE TELEGRAPHIST TOOK THE FLAGSHIP'S MESSAGE TO THE CAPTAIN. A MINUTE LATER, ON THE BRIDGE...

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS SIGNAL, NUMBER ONE?

IS IT ABOUT YOUNG WOOLF, SIR?



FOR THE FIRST TIME, COMMANDER HICHENS HAD APPEARED ON THE BRIDGE OF HIS SHIP CAPLESS AND WITH HIS TUNIC UNBUTTONED.

IT'S ABOUT A SICK RATING, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU MEAN! LISTEN TO THIS! 'IF CONDITION OF RATING WARRANTS IT, THORN TO DETACH FROM OPERATION AND PROCEED FORTHWITH TO LOGISTIC SUPPORT GROUP WHERE MEDICAL FACILITIES EXIST!'

GOOD, SIR!



THE CAPTAIN'S VOICE WAS RAGGED WITH ANGER.

GOOD, YOU SAY? GOOD? THE SUPPORT GROUP IS A HUNDRED MILES BACK TOWARDS SYDNEY, A HUNDRED AND FIFTY MILES FROM THE FIRING LINE! YOU REALISE THAT? MISTER GRAHAM, PLEASE COME TO MY CABIN!



Enemy Engaged

INSIDE THE CABIN, THE CAPTAIN OF THE THORN TURNED WITH A COLD VIOLENCE ON HIS FIRST LIEUTENANT.

SHUT THE DOOR, MISTER GRAHAM! I THINK WE'D BETTER HAVE THIS OUT NOW! WHAT'S GOING ON ON MY SHIP?

I DON'T UNDERSTAND, SIR! YOU TOLD ME TO DO WHAT WAS NECESSARY FOR THE RATING, SO I SENT A SIGNAL TO THE ADMIRAL OUTLINING THE SITUATION!

MEWILDERED BY THIS SUDDEN STORM, MIKE GRAHAM TRIED TO EXPLAIN...

YOU MEAN YOU ACTUALLY PLEADED FOR THIS SHIP TO BE DETACHED FROM THE OKINAWA ATTACK? YOU ADMIT TO DOING THAT?

I TOLD THE ADMIRAL THAT 'YOUNG WOOLF' WAS DANGEROUSLY ILL WITH APPENDICITIS! I ASKED FOR ADVICE!

COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS HAD HEARD ALL HE WANTED TO HEAR. THE SNEER IN HIS VOICE WAS RUTHLESS NOW...



AT LAST LIEUTENANT GRAHAM KNEW THE TRUTH ABOUT HIS CAPTAIN. BEHIND THAT GOLDEN CHARM LAY A RUTHLESS VANITY, AN INSATIABLE HUNGER FOR SUCCESS. BUT NOW THERE WAS NO TIME FOR ANGER.



I DON'T THINK YOU CAN HAVE UNDERSTOOD ME, SIR! YOUNG WOOLF IS DESPERATELY ILL! IT'S A MATTER OF SAVING HIS LIFE! THE ADMIRAL HAS GIVEN PERMISSION TO DETACH THE THORN TO DO THAT!

COLD AND IMPLACABLE, THE HARSH AMBITION OF COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS DROVE HIM ON...

THE SIGNAL SAYS 'IF THE CONDITION OF THE RATING WARRANTS IT!' IN MY VIEW, IT DOESN'T WARRANT IT! AND MAY I REMIND YOU THAT I AM THE CAPTAIN OF THIS SHIP, LIEUTENANT?



BUT YOU HAVEN'T EVEN BOTHERED TO SEE WOOLF, SIR!

A MAN'S LIFE HUNG IN THE BALANCE, BUT THE CAPTAIN OF THE THORN COULD NOT...OR WOULD NOT... SEE IT.



I DON'T NEED TO SEE THE BRAT, MISTER GRAHAM! I KNOW A MALINGERER WITHOUT SEEING HIM! NOW WE'LL GO BACK TO THE BRIDGE, AND I'LL MAKE SURE THAT OUR COURSE FOR THE NIGHT IS CORRECT! THE THORN FIGHTS TOMORROW AT OKINAWA!

SICK AT HEART, THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT FOLLOWED HIS SUPERIOR OFFICER TO THE BRIDGE...

SIR, WOOLFS GETTING WORSE UNLESS WE CHANGE COURSE...

WE'RE NOT CHANGING COURSE, MAN! YOU'RE A COMPETENT SICK BERTH ATTENDANT, I TAKE IT? GET BELOW AND DO YOUR JOB, THEN! YOU HAVE NO BUSINESS ON THE BRIDGE!



WITH A MUTE APPEAL IN HIS FACE, THE S.B.A. TURNED TO THE FIRST LIEUTENANT. MIKE GRAHAM CLENCHED HIS FISTS. IN THE ROYAL NAVY, THE WORD OF THE CAPTAIN IS LAW...

SEND A SIGNAL TO THE FLAGSHIP, MISTER DOUGLAS. 'RATING'S CONDITION HAS IMPROVED! THORN WILL KEEP HER STATION IN THE LINE TOMORROW!'

I'M SORRY! THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO NOW!

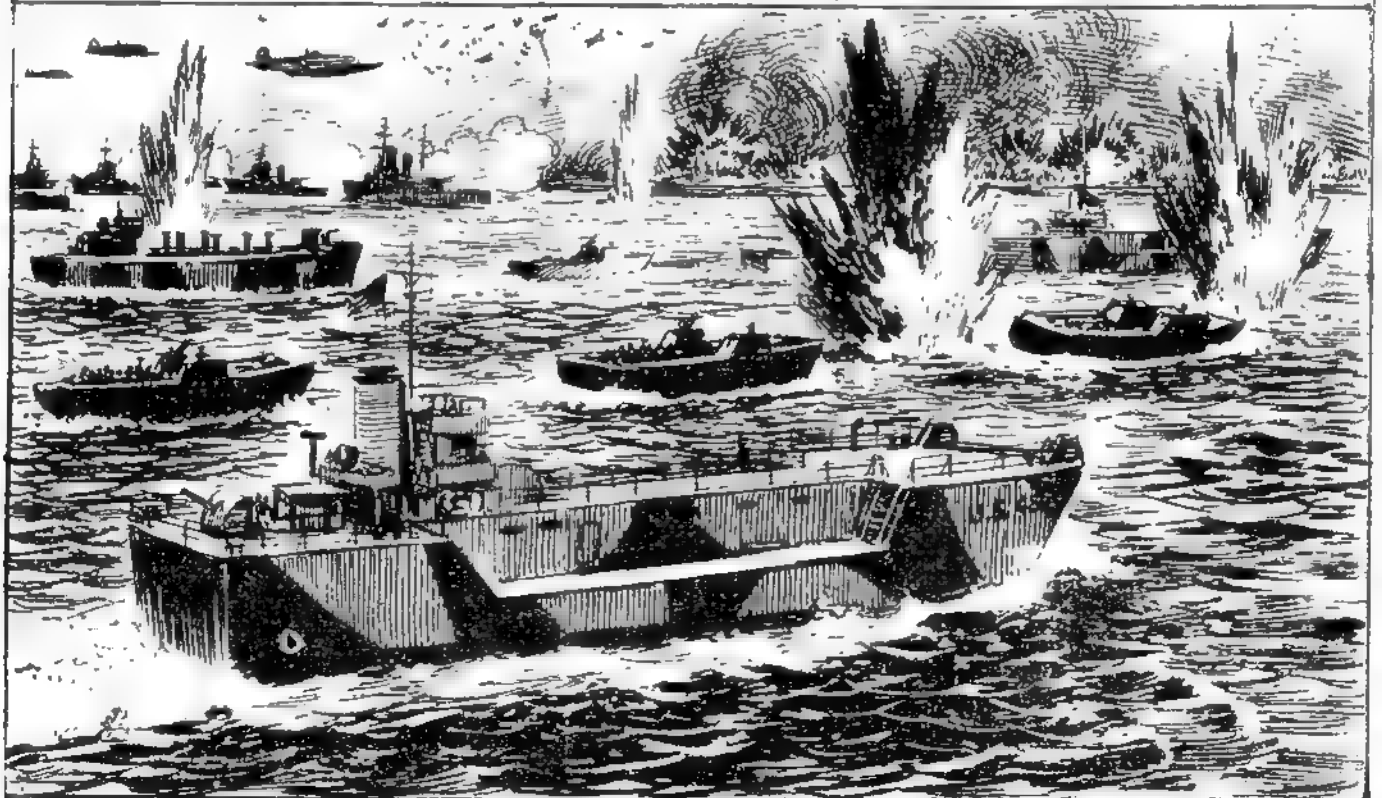


Chapter 4. THE FIRES OF WAR

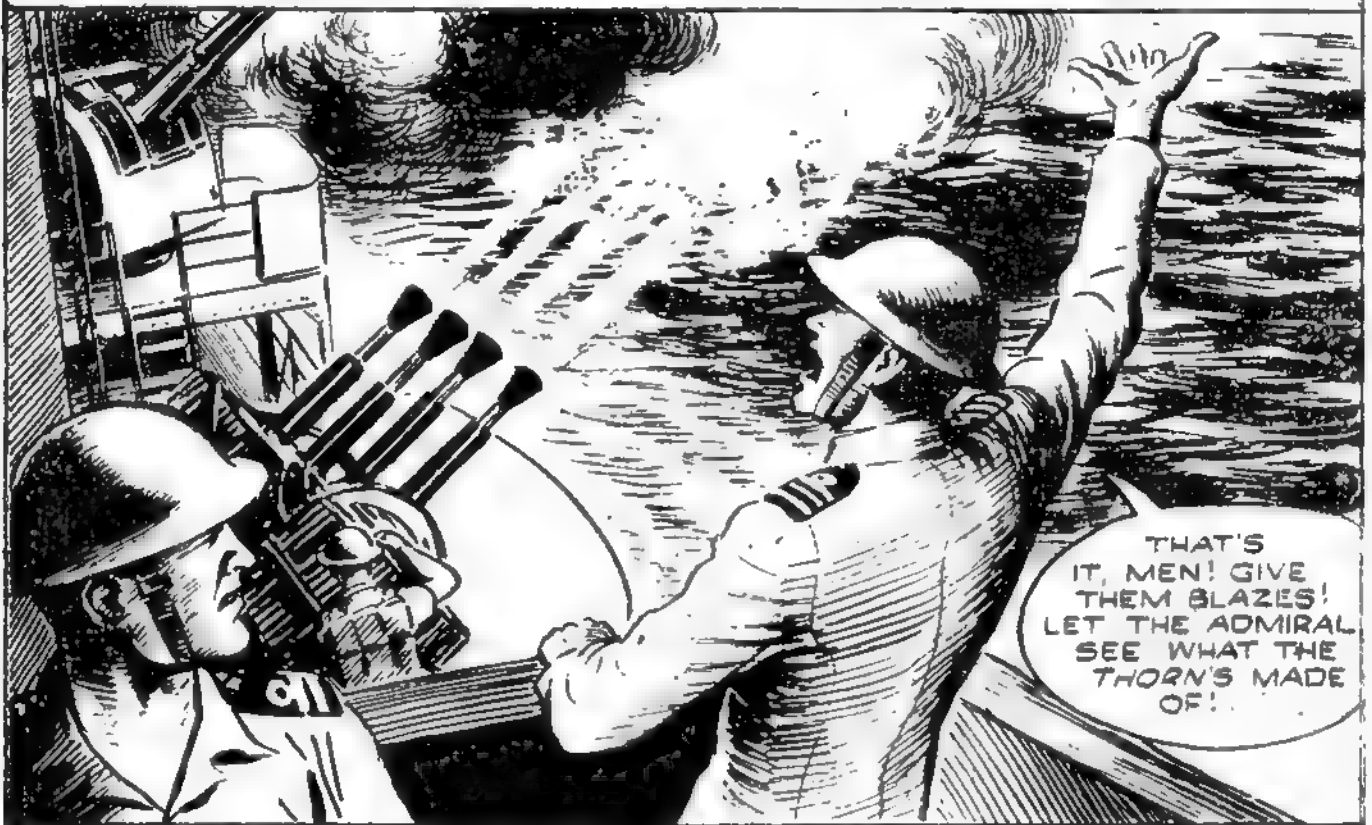
ALL THAT NIGHT, THE THORN PRESSED ON TOWARDS THE DEADLY BEACHES OF OKINAWA. AT DAWN, A SULLEN SHIP STRIPPED ITS GUNS FOR ACTION.



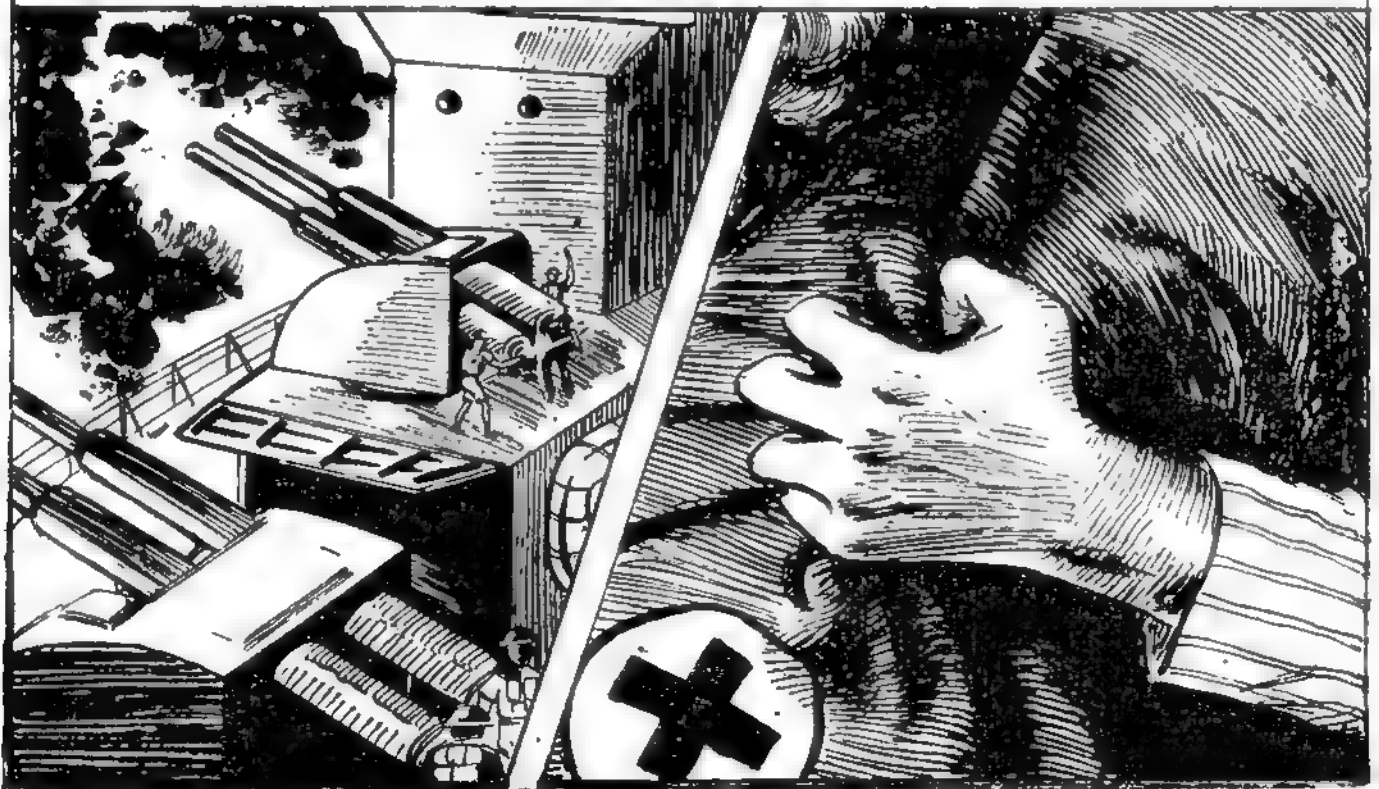
A SINGLE MAN FOUGHT FOR HIS LIFE BELOW THE DESTROYER'S DECKS. ABOVE, THE FIGHT FOR A FOOTHOLD ON JAPANESE-HELD OKINAWA BEGAN WITH A SEARING BROADSIDE FROM THE GUNS OF THE ALLIED FLEET.



DRIVEN ON BY HER RELENTLESS CAPTAIN, THE THORN PLUNGED INTO THAT INFERNO OF FLAMING CORDITE WITH ALL GUNS BLAZING. STRIPPED OF ITS SMILING MASK, THE AMBITION OF COMMANDER HICHENS WAS NAKED AND UGLY...

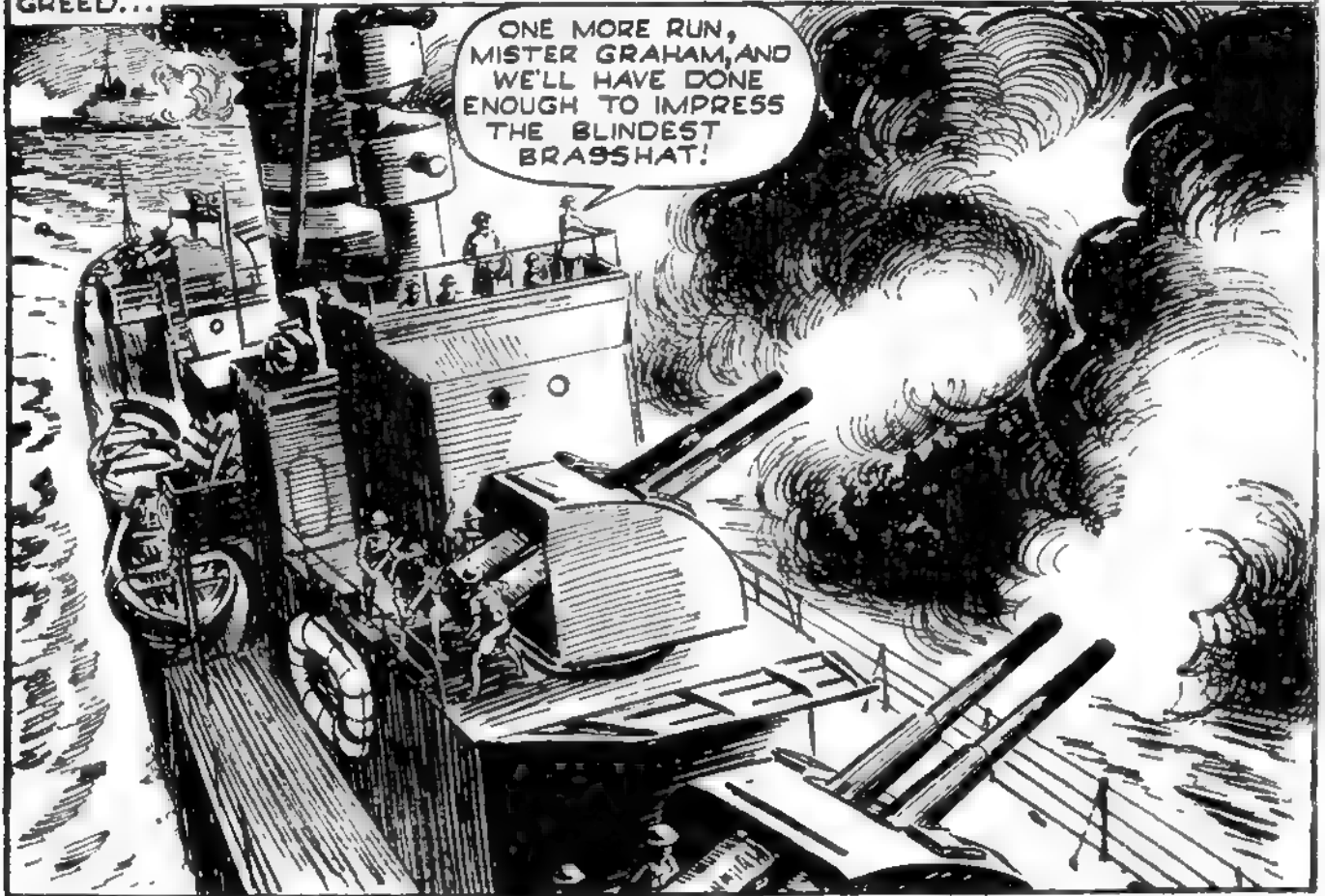


COLDLY WATCHING HIS CAPTAIN, MIKE GRAHAM REMEMBERED THE DYING WORDS OF LIEUTENANT COMMANDER ROBBINS. "A SHIP AND ITS MEN WILL BE IN YOUR HANDS! SERVE THEM WELL!" AND THIS WAS HOW THE HANDS OF DESMOND HICHENS SERVED HIS SHIP AND HIS MEN.



Enemy Engaged

THE THORN BORE AWAY FROM ITS FIRING RUN ALONG THE SHELL-TORN BEACHES, A HARSH SMELL OF CORDITE DRIFTING ACROSS ITS STRIPPED DECKS. ITS CAPTAIN HAD COURAGE... BUT IT WAS THE UGLY COURAGE OF GREED...



ONCE MORE THE DESTROYER LUNGED RELENTLESSLY THROUGH THE WATERS OFF OKINAWA. AND AS IT PULLED AWAY FOR THE LAST TIME, A GRAVE-EYED RATING STEPPED ON TO THE BRIDGE TO HEAR THE SLEEK VOICE OF THE CAPTAIN...



IN A NARROW IRON COT BELOW DECKS, A BRAVE FIGHT HAD ENDED IN DEFEAT.



COMMANDER DESMOND HICHENS TURNED TO FACE HIS ACCUSERS. HIS FACE WAS SHARP AND WARY, BUT HIS WORDS WERE STILL SMOOTH.

COME, MISTER GRAHAM, THIS IS REGRETTABLE, BUT WE MUSTN'T LOSE OUR SENSE OF PROPORTION, MUST WE? HUNDREDS OF MEN WILL DIE TODAY ON THOSE BEACHES OVER THERE!



THE VOICE OF LIEUTENANT MICHAEL GRAHAM WAS DEADLY WITH CONTEMPT. BUT EVEN AS HE SPOKE...

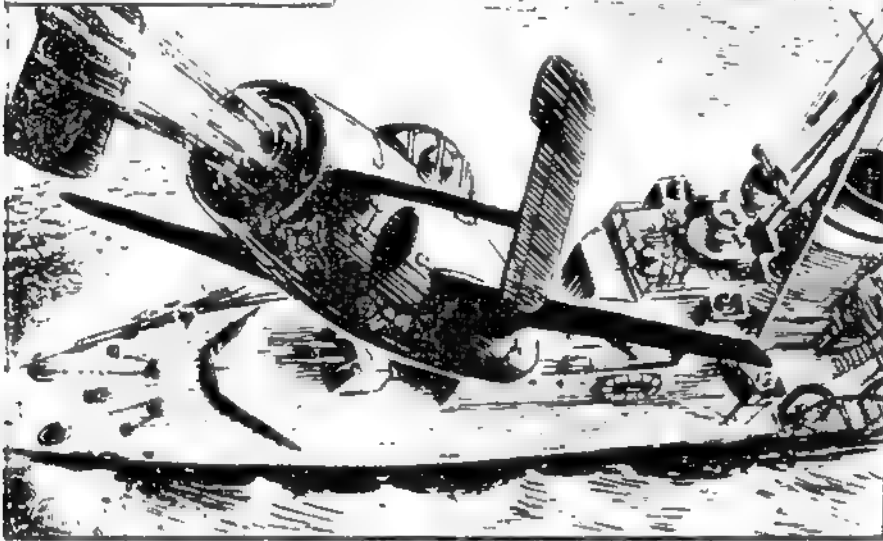
YES, SIR, THEY'LL DIE... BUT THEY WON'T BE MURDERED!

KAMIKAZE!
RED EIGHT
ZERO!

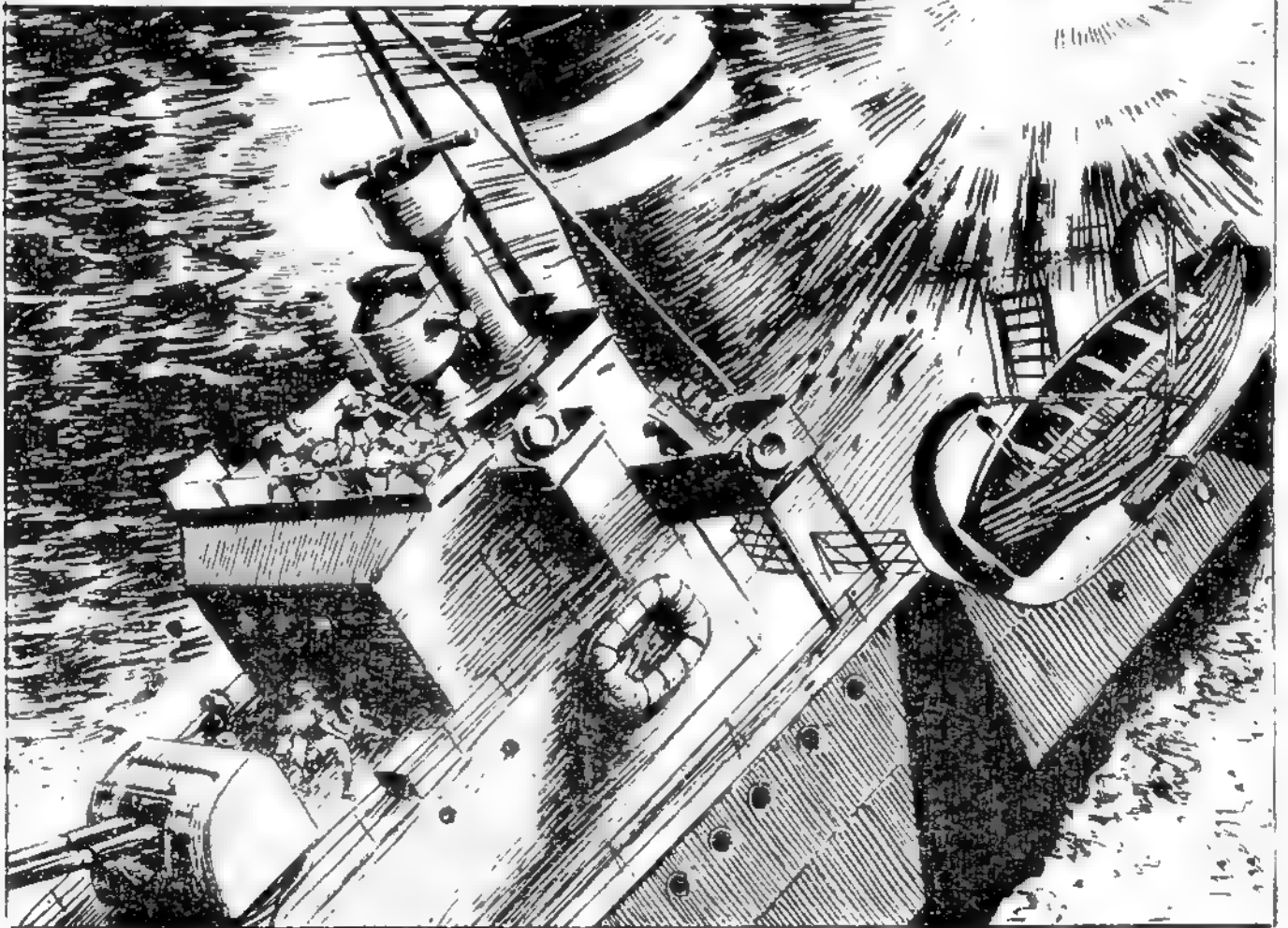


Enemy Engaged

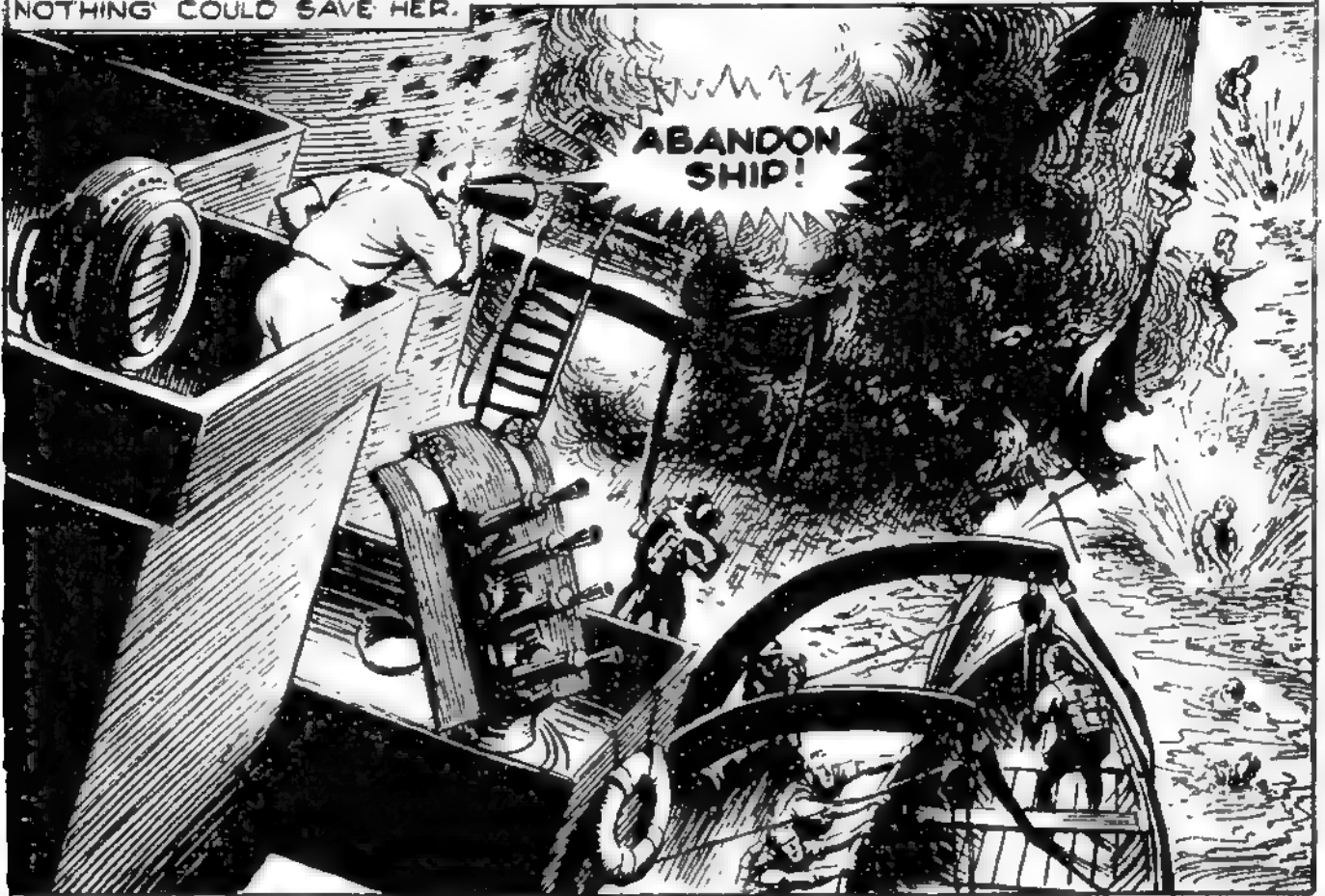
OVER THE BEACHES OF OKINAWA THAT DAY, THE CORNERED JAPANESE WERE THROWING THEIR LAST GRIM WEAPON AT THE INVADERS... THE SUICIDE PLANES. THE PILOT OF ONE ROCKET-PROPELLED BAKA HAD SELECTED H.M.S. THORN FOR HIS FUNERAL PYRE...



THE TERRIBLE, MAN-DIRECTED MISSILE SLAMMED INTO THE STEEL SKIN OF THE BRITISH WARSHIP AT 600 MILES PER HOUR AND ITS TON OF HIGH EXPLOSIVE RIPPED THE DESTROYER APART.



H.M.S. THORN REELED AND AS THE DAZED MIKE GRAHAM PICKED HIMSELF UP FROM THE TILTING DECK OF THE BRIDGE, HE SAW AT A SINGLE GLANCE THAT NOTHING COULD SAVE HER.



THE CREW OF THE THORN WERE ALREADY LEAVING FOR THEIR LIVES INTO THE BOILING SEA. THE FIRST LIEUTENANT TURNED BACK TO THE BRIDGE WITH NARROWED EYES...



BUT DESMOND HICHENS SCUTTLED DOWN THE LADDER TOWARDS THE WHEELHOUSE. ANGER AND CONTEMPT DROVE MIKE GRAHAM RELENTLESSLY AFTER THE THORN'S DESPICABLE CAPTAIN...



THE VOICE OF THE OFFICER IN THE BOAT REACHED THINLY TO LIEUTENANT GRAHAM, BUT HE DID NOT HEED IT. HE REACHED THE DOOR OF THE WHEELHOUSE AND FLUNG IT OPEN...



HICHENS' EYES WERE STARING... HIS VOICE HIGH-PITCHED...



COURT OF INQUIRY? WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

NATURALLY I SHALL MAKE A REPORT ABOUT SIGNALMAN WOOLF, SIR! YOU DELIBERATELY DISREGARDED THE ADMIRAL'S ORDER! YOU WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THAT BOY'S DEATH!

SLOWLY THE VENEER OF CONFIDENCE HAD BEEN STRIPPED AWAY FROM DESMOND HICHENS. HE CRINGED AND BEGAN TO WHINE...



GRAHAM, YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME! THINK OF MY CAREER...

YOUR CAREER! EVEN NOW, THAT'S ALL YOU CAN THINK OF, ISN'T IT? YOU WHEELED YOUR WAY ON TO A SHIP YOU AREN'T FIT TO COMMAND! YOU JEOPARDISED HER BY YOUR STUPIDITY DURING THAT AIR ATTACK... AND NOW YOU'VE SACRIFICED A BOY TO THAT GOLDEN CAREER OF YOURS!

COLDLY, THE FIRST LIEUTENANT OF THE THORN FACED HIS CAPTAIN...



WHEN HE WAS DYING, MY LAST SKIPPER TOLD ME THAT COMMAND OF A SHIP WOULD FIND A MAN OUT! NOW I KNOW WHAT HE MEANT! THE THORN HAS FOUND YOU OUT, HICHENS, AND YOU'RE ROTTEN!

Enemy Engaged

GRAHAM WAS ABOUT TO TURN CONTEMPTUOUSLY AWAY WHEN HICHENS SNATCHED HIS HAND SUDDENLY FROM BEHIND HIS BACK. HIS TEETH BARED IN A SNARL.

ALL
RIGHT, GRAHAM! IF
YOU WON'T LISTEN
TO REASON...

WHAT THE
DEUCE...

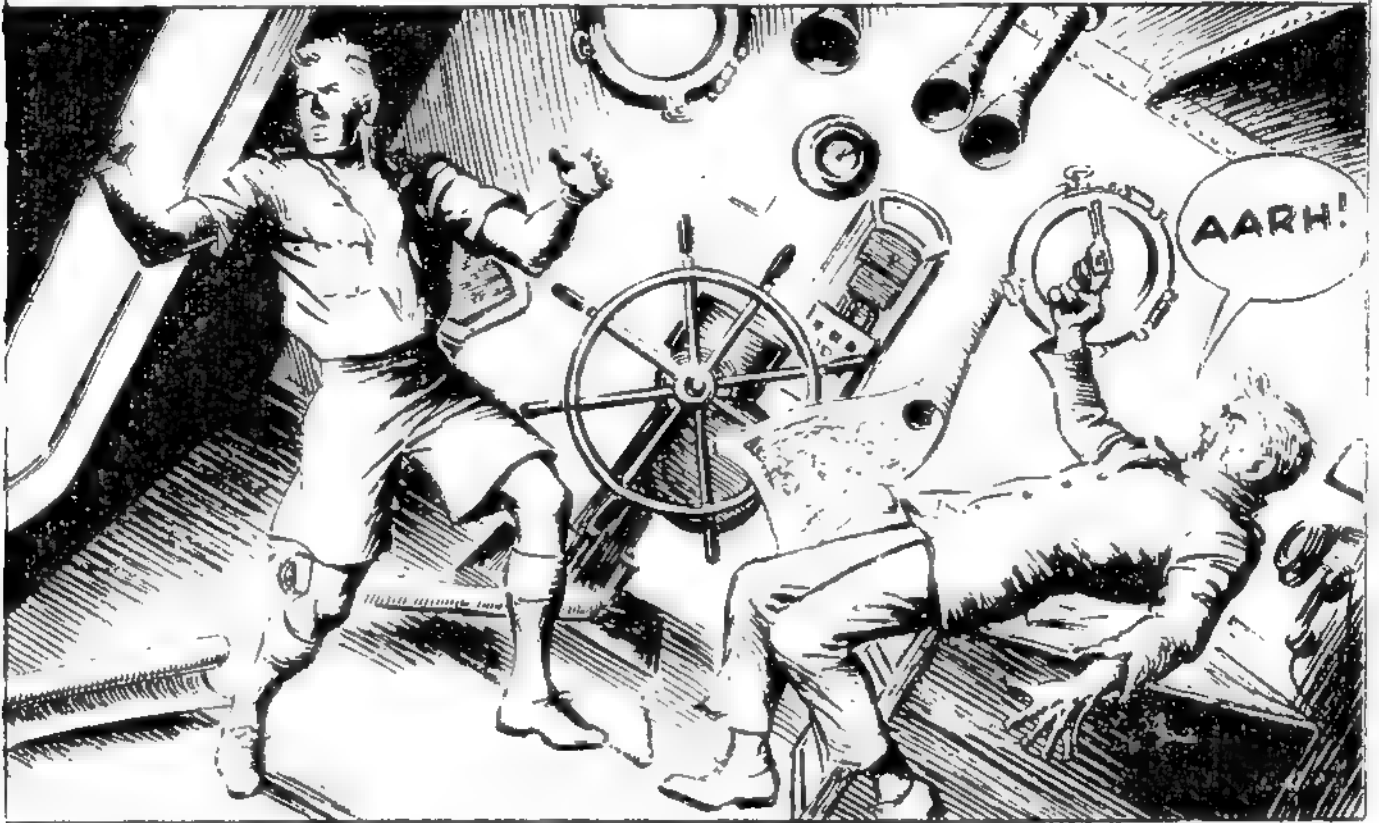


THIS, AT LAST, WAS THE REAL DESMOND HICHENS, A TWISTED SMILE ON HIS FACE, A GUN IN HIS HAND, AND MURDER IN HIS HEART.

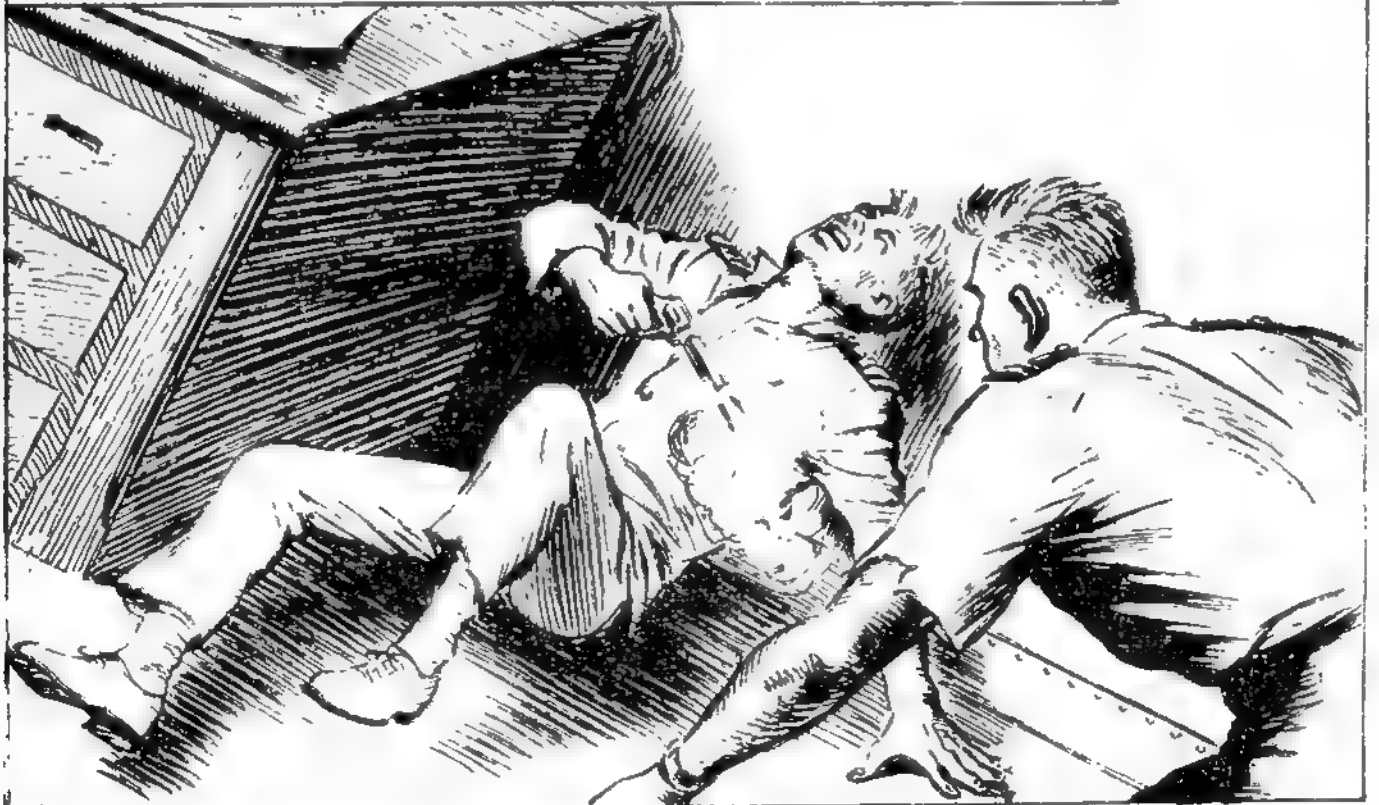
WELL? WHY NOT? THE SICK
BERTH ATTENDANT'S DEAD ON
THE BRIDGE UP THERE! YOU'RE THE
ONLY ONE LEFT WHO CAN MAKE
REAL TROUBLE FOR ME! WHEN
THE THORN GOES DOWN, YOU'LL
GO DOWN WITH HER, MISTER
CLEVER GRAHAM... WITH A
BULLET IN YOU, BUT WHO'LL
EVER KNOW THAT?
NOW...



THE BARREL OF THE REVOLVER STEADIED ON THE FIRST LIEUTENANT'S CHEST. THE THIN FINGER TIGHTENED ON THE TRIGGER. DEATH STARED MIKE GRAHAM STARKLY IN THE FACE... THEN THE SHIP LURCHED VIOLENTLY...



DESMOND HICHENS WAS FLUNG OFF HIS FEET AND THE HAND CLUTCHING THE LOADED REVOLVER SLAMMED AGAINST THE BULKHEAD AND TURNED INWARDS...



H. M. S. THORN HERSELF HAD TURNED AGAINST THE MAN WHO HAD SOUGHT TO USE, INSTEAD OF SERVE HER.



KNEELING BESIDE THE DEAD MAN, WITH THE SHIP THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN HIS SINKING UNDER HIS FEET, LIEUTENANT GRAHAM COULD STILL FIND PITY IN HIS HEART.



THE THORN SHUDDERED AGAIN AND THE DECK TILTED EVEN MORE STEEPLY. THE YOUNG OFFICER CLAWED HIS WAY UP TO THE DECK AND RAN TO THE RAIL. ALREADY THE SHIP'S SCREW AND RUDDER WERE EXPOSED AS THE BOWS SANK INTO THE WATER...



MINUTES LATER, TREADING WATER SOME DISTANCE AWAY, THE FIRST LIEUTENANT OF H.M.S. THORN LOOKED BACK TO SEE HIS SHIP TAKE THE FINAL PLUNGE. THE VICIOUS SECRET OF THE WHEELHOUSE WAS SAFE NOW FOREVER IN THE DEPTHS OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN.



MIKE GRAHAM SWAM AIMLESSLY FOR A LONG WHILE. HE HAD TIME NOW TO THINK. BUT IT SEEMED TO HIM THAT HIS MIND HAD BEEN MADE UP IN THAT MOMENT WHEN HE HAD KNELT BESIDE THE STILL BODY OF HIS UNWORTHY CAPTAIN.



H.M.S. THORN HAD GONE DOWN WITH HER CAPTAIN. NOTHING THAT COULD BE BROUGHT AGAINST HIM NOW COULD HURT THE OFFICER WHO HAD SOUGHT GLORY WITHOUT EARNING IT. BUT THE SORDID TRUTH WOULD HURT THE ROYAL NAVY.



THE PRESTIGE OF ITS OFFICERS IS THE PRESTIGE OF THE ROYAL NAVY. IT WAS THIS WHICH MATTERED TO LIEUTENANT GRAHAM. IN DEATH, LET DESMOND HICHENS ACHIEVE THE HONOUR HE HAD SOUGHT SO GREEDILY FROM LIFE.



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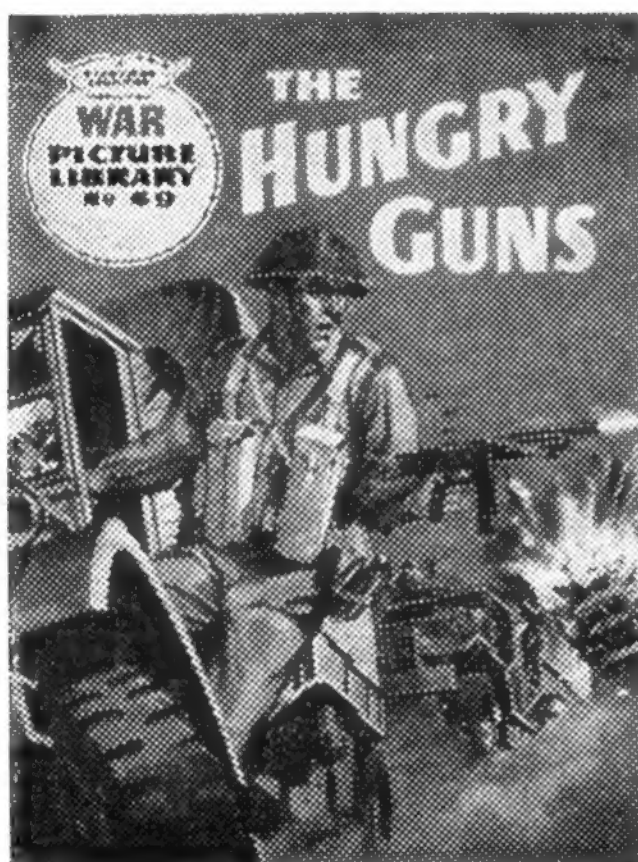
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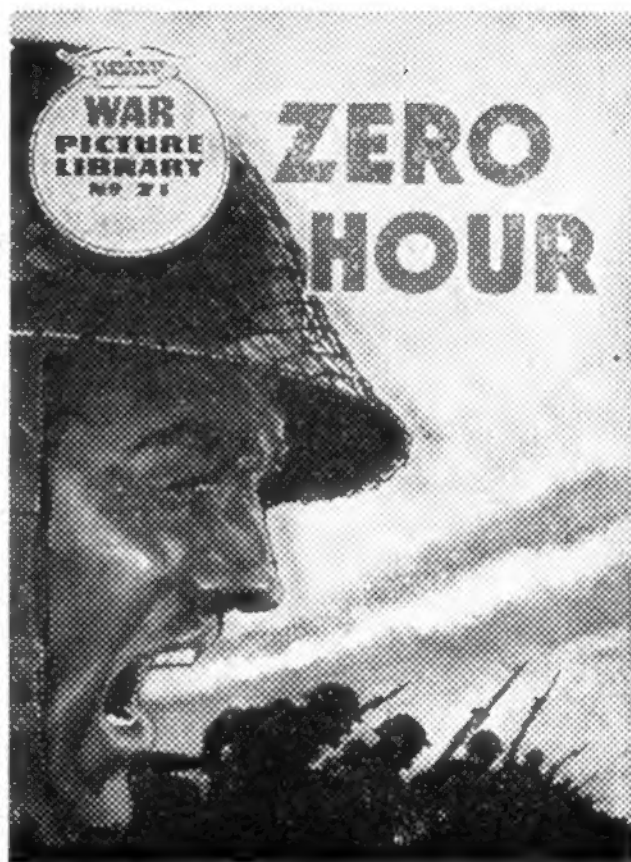
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